



SK'L'TON HO'SE

LOVE IN THE TIME OF
VACUUM
DECAY

CHOP SUEY

"COMPELLING AND GENUINELY FRIGHTENING"
- OMNI ROMNOX

To Satan

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Introduction

Choad was getting too old for this shit. "Look, you just click on the folders." He paused, placing his palm on his forehead, seeming to steady himself. "You just DOUBLE click on the folders I mean..." He shook his head in a movement that barely registered on the campers' scale of perception. "Then, inside, you find all the Good Stuff!"

They were gathered around a modest campfire Choad had built for them, and though by all accounts it was still light out when they lit it, now any time one looked behind into the surrounding wood, the darkness seemed menacing and total, twilight that much darker in comparison to their small but proud beacon of civilization.

"But what does it mean Choad? Double click..." the last two words almost a whisper, a veil whisked away, sucked by an invisible vortex beyond the night as soon as they were uttered.

"The Holy Book doesn't define it George, I could sit here and read scripture til' the cows came home. It's said that it'll all make sense when the time comes. The rest is just vague metaphor, filigree upon the column of faith."

"Okay then Chief, if'n you're so smart, tell us more about this, Good Stuff then," spoke CR-52.

Choad once again hefted the large book onto his lap. The campers leaned in for a closer look. "Introduction" said the sunken letters embossed in the ancient leather. The heavy cover was lifted, and at the same time, sparks rose from the fire, floating up amongst the firs and dancing in a mystical way that may have told its own profane secrets had the campers' attention not been fully usurped.

"Are you constantly getting broke and do not have enough bucks to live your life to the maximum? Then, this is the time you take a turn in your life and start making some good entertainments for very little effort! You will not even dream how easy it is to make a lot of times more jollies than you earn today and you can finally get the desires that you had to give up because of being broke. Don't waste your time, RAM IT IN, and claim your reward! Over 5,000 hours of digital media entertainment!"

Finally, a crackling log slumped down into the coals. Its crash the first manifest evidence of physical reality to rouse the listeners from the book's glamour. The floppy disk containing the .epub sat where they had placed it, in the middle of a circle of salt some paces away from the fire. Glanton licked his parched lips and placed his hand on the hilt of the bowie knife. Millicent, demure and innocent Millicent, withdrew her Dentata F series Botulinum Injector from her secret place beneath billowing skirts.

They all looked at the blue plastic rectangle sitting there, its at once beguiling and enrapturing visage leading them all toward a secret oblivion. The dry click of a hammer being pulled back was all it took...

"A festa do Gralha-Azul será comemorada anualmente," muttered Choad as those around him at the fire rose and began to engage in violence, great torrents of blood and savagery spurring on the growing night all about them. "A festa do Gralha-Azul será comemorada anualmente."

After Work

He'd finished his sixth shift in a row at the vapor mill and ran all the way home (running because of the dingoes, naturally).

When he got there, she was sprawled out face down on the floor. Too much online shopping again.

"Finally, you're back," voice muffled by the carpet.

By the time he'd taken off his speed suit, she'd roused marginally and had one drool smeared cheek raised.

"It's about time too; I need another shot."

He went to the cabinet and hesitated between the botulism injection before grabbing the dex. Kneeling down beside her, he gingerly rolled up the nightgown's sleeve and slid in the needle. She recoiled across the ground with a shriek, clawing her nails into his skin in thrashing retreat.

He vaguely massaged his wound before walking over and giving her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Face mashed against the sofa, she dry heaved several times.

"Somebody's going to have to help me decide which peasant comes to clean this shithole!"

Four floating windows appeared in the living room. On them, down-trodden, infection stained, but still hopeful faces of applicants smiled weakly back at him.

"I like Pr'k'Daah Aahm, it says she'll forfeit her life support if I'm not 100% satisfied."

"Not bad, I like that, even though she can't speak, she's still putting herself out there."

No response. He glanced over quickly. She wasn't moving, but a cursor was, bouncing between tabs of local, artisanal pottery.

"Can you come jack-in? I don't know which vase we should get for the airlock"

"Five minutes babe. I'll jack-in in five minutes" He wanted badly to lay down, his eyes burning from seventeen hours straight in the simulator.

She bolted to her feet. "FINE Take all the damn time you need!" Grabbing the ukulele, she stormed off into the bedroom.

Five minutes, he only wanted five minutes! Gee-whiz! He took out his pack of peyote cigarettes. Empty. He stepped toward the balcony as loud strumming came from behind the closed bedroom door.

After giving her her space, an hour to cool off, he went and laid down next to her, holding her close, saying nothing.

"..no woman no cry. I remember when, when we use to sit, in the government yard in Trenchtown..." atonal notes jarring against the chorus as she ignored his embrace and kept playing

This went on. All seemed right with the world, God in his heaven and all that. The song ended.

"One more time baby, one more time," he murmured. Before the song she was playing along to started up again, a commercial for Solnar's lime brick, that nostalgic, hard-water taste began lulling him to sleep.

Weight being lifted from the bed. The door slamming again.

Then, many minutes later, the door being ripped off its hinges as she reentered to claim her phone.

"And another thing! We've got another limb regeneration appointment in the morning! I can't go another day like this!"

Her arm was, as far as he could tell, fine, holding up better than his at least. The literature had mentioned something about the scorpions and B blood type...

"Anything babe. Anything I can do for you" he caressed her side. She paused. He mistook this for her coming around.

"I WANT YOU TO BE RESPONSIBLE AND TAKE CARE OF THIS PLACE. FIVE MINUTES! TWENTY MINUTES! CAN'T YOU DO ANYTHING AROUND HERE!"

He stared open-mouthed, though he shouldn't have been surprised, as she opened the hovel door and stormed off into the night, sans suit.

He could have thought about the dishes he cleaned, the dinner he cooked or maybe the broken airlock that he'd rigged with the supplies he'd saved up for. And there was the water supply, until the weekend before drastically low, that he saved from exhaustion with quick thinking, careful alertness and five hours sweating under the collection tank in the Mercutian heat. Instead, he thought about the botulism injector and tried to remember, was it 42 or 72 virgins...

Geraldine's Blanket

When Geraldine was born, her Aunt Bessie bought her a pink blanket. Mama and Papa put the blanket in the crib with little baby Geraldine, and so, even before Geraldine could walk or talk or operate the forklift by herself, she and that blanket were inseparable.

Geraldine took the blanket with her everywhere. When they were going out, Mama would say, "You won't need that blanket on the Holodeck," but Geraldine would bring it anyways, and she always found a use for it. For example, as a blindfold for the horrors on the Holodeck.

When the blanket got ripped, Mama would sew patches on it. If the blanket got caustic potash on it, Papa would wash it in dinitrogen pentoxide. If the blanket started foaming, Mama would stomp on it until it stopped, and if the edges got frayed Papa would take it in the shop and use the HY400 thin-kerf, center-cut industrial saw to trim them. But Geraldine only loved it more.

When Mama would say, "There's hardly any blanket left," Geraldine would just cover her ears. When Papa would say, "That thing's cursed," Geraldine would hum loudly and stamp her foot.

Mama tried to leave it in the clothes fire machine, but Geraldine found it right away. She chained it to her wrist during the day and zapped it into her infinite storage gauntlets at night.

Mama and Papa began talking in whispers.

One Christmas there was a new present from Aunt Bessie waiting under the tree! Geraldine could hardly wait to open it. When she finally threw off the lid of the box, she saw the shiny ray-gun inside and grabbed it, then vaporized both of her parents on the spot. At last she didn't have to worry about losing her pink blanket to the clothes burnager ever again!

He

He'd gotten the job. He didn't know exactly what it all meant, but he'd do just about anything at this point. They told him the place, the time and that was about it. Except that he was supposed to smile. Just look in through the window and smile. That part he still didn't get, but again, he'd do just about anything.

All of this was written on a scrap of paper he found poking out from the stall door in the Greyhound station bathroom. He hadn't remembered applying, but boy did he need a job. He took the paper out and shoved it in his leather jacket's interior pocket, leaving the station while occasionally glancing over his shoulders to make sure nobody was watching him. He growled at a man reading a newspaper when his eyes glanced up from the copy.

He arrived at the window sometime after eight. All he knew was that it must've been after eight, the sun was down. Okay, he told himself, I know it's weird, but they promised 250\$ bucks a night if I stand here and smile. That part hadn't been written in the note, but it was implied, somehow. He stood up straight, sucked in his gut and put on his best grin. He could see a bit of his reflection in the window, orange whiskers, Ray-Ban Wayfarers, and one heck of a winning smile. In his eyes at least it was.

The first night had been a bit rough. It's not something you really think about but smiling like that can wear you out. Before long, his facial muscles were spasming and he felt like he'd lose it any second, but the note had been quite firm about one fact. He should never stop smiling, not ever, not even for an instant as long as he was standing in front of that window.

Night after night, it was the same view into the house. White banister leading up the staircase, warm glow coming from the plastic bead chandelier, Berber rug and mahogany dining set. The steps were teak and underneath a slatted door, probably enough room in there for a vacuum cleaner and extra bags. He imagined it was cool inside, not explicitly hearing it, but imagining the low hum of central air. Then, each night at midnight, he'd turn around and walk away. Not willing to relax his muscles until well away from the window, he'd sometimes walk a mile, still smirking, before finally heaving a sigh of relief and rolling his jaw around. He'd wait for the 309, take it to Uptown, then walk behind the printer's shop and collect his \$250 dollars from the outstretched hand of the Jefferson Davis statue.

He wasn't completely comfortable with it. Often, he'd hug himself as he tossed and turned on the Monroe park bench, scraping his denim jeans on the corner as he moved his legs anxiously back and forth, unable to sleep. There was nothing written on the note about the money, where to pick it up, who it was from or how his smile was never to falter as long as he was standing in front of the window, so how then did he know these things? Additionally, he'd gone so long since vocalizing a thought in any coherent language that he wasn't entirely sure he remembered remembering a language...

Still, it was a pretty good gig, for a while. The money was piling up and, after all, it was only a few hours a day. People on the street even seemed to pass him with a bit of a different manner. His newfound sunny disposition seemed to be garnering kinder treatment from his fellow city dwellers. Additionally, eye contact no longer filled him with the seething cackle of diabolical hatred. In moments of skeptical optimism, he half believed he could keep it going.

Except of course that one night his smile must fail; he knew it would happen sooner or later, but I knew it first. Deep inside, he never really believed that it wouldn't anyways. And of course, finally, it did.

It must've been after eight, the sun was, as it often was then, down. The rash under his Levis had been especially purulent that week, and as usual when this happened, it tried to speak to him. He managed to calm it enough to keep its nebulous thoughts from penetrating his temporal lobe, but in that moment, he realized his smile must've faltered. Only for a moment, but in that instant of scratching it all came apart. Like an apocryphal book lying forgotten forever in an infinite sea of sand, never touched, but disintegrating, not even its shadow remaining, when the first hot, terrifying breath of the desert came and scattered it to the void.

Collapsing in on himself in a frozen coma of woe, he stared into the reflection was no longer he.

In his place, a brand new 2018 Polaris 800 Switchback Adventure.

"Dangit! Snowmobile again!" he lamented.

Public Lot

Now I will tell you a story that I found on the island of Kos. A story like a potsherd, forgotten amongst thousands of years of dust.

It came to me while napping beneath the plane tree of Hippocrates. Why this particular vision was chosen, or I to receive it, is unknown to me, but it began in a parking lot glowing in a light that was either late summer, early autumn or both.

Gripping the hand grenade, pin removed, she stood stock still, refusing to move. "Either you roll up the window all the way, or I toss it in."

Annoyed, he said, "Look, you want to roll up the window, I want to leave it cracked a smidge. Either way, someone gets what they want, and the other person doesn't." He leveled the laser pistol, both arms outstretched, at her midsection. "At least I'm not threatening you with a hand-grenade!"

They stood like this for some time, neither willing to compromise. When the ticket collector came by to remind them that the last entry would be in five minutes, he thought about blowing him away too, but didn't want to upset his fragile stake in the standoff.

"Go ahead and enjoy the ruins," she said, a vicious grin curling the edges of her mouth.

He shook his head, spat at the pavement and squinted hard.

Then, something crashed out of trees, thumping into the brush. When she broke her gaze, but for a moment, he fired the heat beam at the grenade and vaporized it.

She jerked her right fist back reflexively. "Just great," she said, shaking the scorched hand. "That was our last grenade!"

He spun the pistol, pivoting it with his finger in the trigger guard, then holstered it, squirting another jet of tobacco juice at the ground. He strode over to the figure as it then stood, brushing pine needles from its himation.

"Name's Omiros." The satyr approached him, reaching out to shake.

Arms folded, he looked the squat, half-goat man up and down, sizing him up.

The silenus pointed. "Say, you'd better do something about tha-" but it was too late. Squealing tires as she peeled out, the two figures watched the back of the car recede into the distance.

"Don't worry about that," he coughed. Taking a secondary key fob from his pocket, he pressed the lock button a number of times. "She don't know how to unlock it from the inside".

"Well, it doesn't matter. It's you I came to see anyways. She doesn't figure into this. You don't know it yet, but you're in grave danger. See, you're not really here. This is a dream. Right now, you're fast asleep and something really bad is about to happen.

He dropped his arm, right index finger twitching.

"Okay, okay! I get it. Why should you trust me? I mean, look!" He gestured with both arms at his diminutive stature. "But really, I'm just a projection of your conscious mind. I got sent down here to give you a warning. In about fifteen seconds-" but there the sentence ended. Quick as a flash, he drew and fired, Omiros vanishing in a puff of smoke. He chuckled, a dry chuckle like the sound of a poor rock, first kicked by the Father of Medicine, and then again and again across millennia by invariant passersby.

Meanwhile, back under the tree, the Toyota Aygo was hurling at its base at 100kmh, well over the advised speed limit for the public square. It was too late for him, he knew that, but maybe not for her. "Quick honey, the window!" he shouted as she scratched wildly at the door's handle.

Hot and Cold

"Have you heard about the new ride at Pleasure World?"

"No."

"Oh man! You gotta check it out. It goes 900 feet up in the air!"

"No, it doesn't."

"Oh. Well. You're right but, it goes really high and then WHOOOSH! You come back down!"

"No."

"How would you know? You said you never even heard of it before!"

"I meant, no, I will never ever take you to such a ride."

"I haven't even told you about the best part yet."

"That is true. You haven't."

"Ok, ok, so you know, like in normal rides, you always gotta wait a super-duper long time before you get to ride it, right? Like, two or three hours! Then you finally get on, and it's only like 30 seconds long. Man do you feel bummed out! Half the time, it's not even that great. You get a headache, or feel sick, or a seagull crashes into your skull at 100 miles per hour. Remember that time a dump truck full of bowling balls unloaded on the top of a mountain and all the bowling balls were rolling down and then they hit a jump... a-a-and they soared right into the path of the ride and mom got a chest full of bowling balls that knocked the wind out of her?"

"That... never... happened..." the protective iron dome on his head glowed as something within it started warming up.

"W-well... Okay but anyways. That's the thing. On this ride, they have a little guy, and he sneaks up behind you and socks you on the back of your head with something real heavy, like a pipe. WHAM! Down you go, 'cept you don't because they've already got a hook in your back. Then some more guys come along and they haul you up onto one of those tracks, y'know like the ones at the pig factory. You just dangle there, totally unconscious, and every time the line moves, CLUNK you go forward a space. Totally space-age and everything!"

"Nnnnnn" this time, along with the heat, a small whirring noise began.

"Get this. All the way to the front of the line you go, one clunk at a time. Your shoulders all slump, your neck slack and cool and everything. Then, when it's your turn, ANOTHER guy takes a looong pole and starts stuffing people into the cars. Three, four, five to a seat. As many as he can get in there. This is when the ride usually starts so everyone's getting really pumped. Well, that's what would normally happen, but you know, since everyone's all unconscious and everything... you get it. The tension's building. There's a big LED screen counting down. You can hear the pneumatic pressure building up in the pipes!"

"ZZZZZZ" a similar sound of mounting pressure, then suddenly: THWANG! a metal fastener shot off and ricocheted off the wall. PEWWW!

The boy watched it, his wild eyes darting back and forth as the projectile's arc diminished, then launched right back into his lie, "5 - 4 - 3... - next one is one because this ride doesn't have two - 1.....!!!! But the ride never goes, because like, who would care anyways? They just use the same pole to push everyone out the other side into a big lump or pile. By now they're starting to come back around. One by one, they stand back up on their hind legs, look around kinda confused, rub the back of their head, stare at the operation with the pole going on back on the platform, that sort of thing. Then they shrug it off and walk toward the gift shop."

Grandpa, by now, was past the point where he'd blow completely. What started out as not having the patience to say anything in response, then became a burning, incandescent wrath so intense that it couldn't sustain itself. Finally, the current limiting circuits kicked in and the fail safes of the HVAC system that cooled Grandpa's "rage amplifier" switched on.

"In the gift shop, they've got all sorts of cool stuff like electron scanning microscopes, chaos emeralds, Excaliburs and a REALLY big gumball. Behind the desk you get to see the picture they took on the ride except it's not real, right? They use a time share on the USA's billion petaflop Frontier supercomputer to generate a SUPER realistic 3D model from your Facebook pictures and and... it looks kinda funny, not that realistic, but you've got a REAL big smile stretched across your face-"

"No, this iteration's wrong. Shut it down." It'd been a long day. He took a gulp of coffee that'd gone cold from the styrofoam cup. Something wrong with the initial parameters this time, probably. He secretly blamed that idiot, half-baked ASI Terry put in there. He'd keep trying, though he'd have to wait hours for the temperature to stabilize around absolute zero so the quantum computer could function. Somehow, he'd get the machine to spit it out, the model that perfectly described the expansion of the early universe, but, sadly, this time wasn't it.

Horse

Dudley, the evil cousin from Harry Potter, and some neighborhood tough were out playing a game of HORSE one fall evening. They'd been at it for hours since neither of them were any good and despite the fact that Dudley was now twelve feet tall, nobody was making anything other than easy shots.

So far, each of them had H-O-R-S-. It was getting late and Dudley wanted some of mummer's kidney squash (or whatever they ate in that hell hole suburb of Old Smoke). Maybe he'd get lucky and score some mackerel in there too. He'd better land something quick that the tough had no chance of replicating.

He picked up the ball, walked six miles away, and whanged it as hard as he could in the general direction he'd come from. Four days later when he got back (he'd joined several marathons on the return), the tough was smiling at him.

"It went in," growled the tough. "And so did mine."

"Bloody 'ell! 'Ow'd you know from whence camest the ball?"

The tough touched the side of his nose, "Magic. Ain't that what you's always on about? Ta ha!"

Dudley grinded his teeth. "Okay then. Make this shot with your biggeth grimy toe!" Dudley drop kicked the ball, sending it sailing into a grassy lot.

"Ta Ha! You missed." The ball magnetically rolled back to the center of the court. "My turn. Make this shot while doing an endo!" The tough grabbed an abandoned pink training bike, took off grumbling and promptly crashed head-on into the pole of the basketball goal.

"TaHA," Dudley grabbed the ball in both hands. "Make this shot while eating a banana!" Dudley pulled out an already peeled banana from his jeans' pocket, and while socketing it into his mouth with the left hand, launched the ball from his right.

"SWOOSH," mocked the tough as the ball landed in the key. "OK OK, make this shot while bleeding from your head." Dudley thought this was unfair since the tough was the only one suffering thusly. Spitting out a tooth fragment, the tough hurled the ball granny-style over the backboard.

Dudley took a long pull off of his e-cigarette. "Make this shot while wireless charging your phone!" He placed the iPhone Zio that his Uncle Vernon gave him on a portable qi-charging pad plugged into a power bank and hurled the ball so hard at the backboard that it rebounded all the way past the opposite side of the court.

"Make THIS shot while wirelessly charging your phone on a duck's head!" said the tough, placing a discarded cardboard Costa Coffee sleeve on a crushed pack of Dunhills he'd found. Dudley shrugged as the tough bricked the ball just past the free-throw line.

"My turn," roared Dudley. "Make a shot after not thinking about apples for five seconds." Dudley's concentration broke, having thought of apples almost immediately, and he handed off the ball.

"Two can play at THIS game," shouted the tough. Dudley looked on quizzically. "Make this shot while remembering to call your grandmother when you get home!" The tough squared his feet, bounced the ball once on the court, then ran after it as it rolled away over the sideline.

Dudley took the ball and stood in the center circle. "Make this shot without being an imaginary friend I made-up!" He lunged the ball back behind his head with both hands as it slipped out of his grasp.

The wraith picked up the ball and grinned a most wicked grin. "Accelerate the ball to 10% of the speed of light and make the shot!"

"That's impossible!"

"Nah-uh!"

"The energy and time needed to accelerate something with the mass of a basketball to even the smallest fraction of the speed of light are so astronomical thou'st most pathetic brow can't fathom it not even in the slightest!"

"Then I'll invent a time machine at some point in the future, travel ahead and steal the technology, then back to set into motion a series of events that will MAKE it possible!"

"Okay, say for one second that you did! Whenst such a calamitous force reckons the earth, tearing the aether with its dread, such a foul omen indeed wouldst unleash all havoc, harboring with it the final apocalypse of all being!"

The arguing continued like this for some time as the sky darkened. From the direction of home, streetlights flicked on.

The tough droned on and on about orbital gravity assists, arbitrary limitations of the theory of special relativity and Einstein-Rosen bridges. Dudley looked up into the sky and caught the first twinkling star of the night. He admired it, a star that he didn't remember seeing from his happy-bedtime-projector-nightlight that Unky Vernon got him.

The tough looked up too as the point of light grew, first as bright as Venus, then the moon, the sun (bringing full daylight back to the court), then something that evaporated the water from their eyes and seared curls of flesh off their faces. Dudley soured, having little confidence he'd be able to match the shot and would therefore have to take the 'E' and lose the game.

They met him early in the morning on their first day in the new school. They'd just moved to Ghost Crystal Hollows and though the older of the two had already been going to school it was the younger's very first time on a bus, first time leaving his mom, and maybe, the first time he'd ever dream about missing the schoolbus.

Anyways, they'd sat in the first row of seats. Someone behind them was drumming frantically with fistfuls of pencils on the seat, their heads, shoulders, noggins, ears, etc. Of all things, that's what he remembered about his first day. Oh, and it turns out that kid, Geoey Gray, was in *his* kindergarten class.

It may have been the second or third day that on the bus Geoey had tried kissing them. Weird kid, that Geoey Gray. I might be wrong, maybe it was the first day he tried kissing them and the third day he was going bumper crop with the pencils, but I think I'm right.

In that same kindergarten was Sector, who swallowed something like eight dollars of change and had to get his stomach pumped. He got to stay home and play Nintendo for fourteen days, and when all was said and done, Sector's parents let him keep the money. Even at such a young age, our main character was highly jealous and indignant. Also, there was Cyrax, who went missing during naptime one day and didn't turn up until late that following spring, talking about Kirby vacuum cleaners to anyone who would listen for decades afterward. This was the same year that the teacher told his class about kids in past years who brained themselves on coat hooks when they weren't careful hanging up their jackets.

"See, I told you Metallica was a real band. You said there was no such thing! This is my dad's tape."

"Oh, I thought you were talking about that band, Messallica!"

"That doesn't make any sense!"

- a conversation on the way to the playground with Geosh, who would only be Mirt's friend once every seven years.

But none of this was what he was thinking about years later, when he and Geoseph ended up sharing a seat on the bus home. He was trying to tell Geoey about their new Gateway computer. Geoey shrugged; he wasn't a rich boy. He had a computer, that's for sure, but there seemed to be some problems with it. For one thing, the display was upside-down, so they always had to set the monitor on its top, with the base sticking up in the air. And, Geoey told him, it was only in Spanish. (Probably they'd bought it off a migrant worker, but there was no way that anyone in their household spoke a lick of Spanish). Not like Mirt's computer was any great shakes, but he had to feel bad for Geoey, who he imagined living in a brick shack in the middle of a desert with little to no running water, the monochrome display of the computer sometimes coming on randomly displaying an inverted green face...

The bus stopped and let Geoey off at the end of a dusty trail that seemed to stretch several times over the horizon. Mirt would never go down that road, but once he passed by it himself on the bike or dreamed that he had. He looked on with sadness, Geoey's back getting smaller and smaller, walking down that dusty road alone. Walking home to his Simplex-1, with its text only screen, dot-matrix printer and Spanish language version of Algebra Arcade on 12-inch floppy disc.

That's when the bus driver, Zran, started shrieking and accelerating wildly down the country road, her head spinning all the way around like a carousel, flames exploding from her eyes. The tires burned, jets of fire burst from headlights and the ground opened up, revealing a ramp that descended into a Hadean cavern and the very depths of the inferno.

"WE'RE GOIN' TO HELL BOYS!" rose Zran's demonic call over the roaring seismic blasts and violent firestorms erupting all around them.



(Sector, circa 1992)

The Sequel

Toot Toot I heard my machine gun tooting. That would be a problem if something was waiting for us up there, so I switched it to "no tooting" mode.

My combat buddy gripped the handlebars and stared dead-ahead at the horizon, his chrome goggles flashing yellow each time a strip of the dividing line reflected in them.

I sniffled. I don't know, maybe it was the dust of the desert or the cold night air, but just like, how in airplanes, God is more likely to answer your prayers, I found that in the motorcycle's sidecar, my nose ran faster.

We'd gone AWOL about an hour before. Fred had kept going on about his nightmares and muttering, "It's close, it's close." I didn't want to talk about it anymore. I'd heard enough. I still don't know how he made it through the psych eval. It must've been some kind of miracle... more like a curse for me.

"Look man, hundreds of years ago, nobody believed Copernicus! They burned that guy at the stake. Next was Galileo. He said he'd invented a telescope, and no one believed that either. 'Tie 'im to the stake!' they'd all shouted."

"Look man, you can't use that defense for everything. Say I stole your bananas and said I didn't. You start harassing me about how everyone in the camp says they saw me take 'em. Then I start going on about, 'Oh! No one believed Copernicus either!'"

"That's different. OK, look, remember Jules Verne, 1895? He writes about a time machine and all the scientists in the world laugh it off as pure fiction."

"That was H. G. Wells you idiot, and that's because it WAS fiction!"

We argued on and on like this, each night in the buddyhole. It's not like I wanted to, but he was my combat pal, right? As soon as you're assigned, they clamp one of those big chains to your explosive utility belts. It wasn't like I was gonna shoot him then drag him around all the live-long day.

Here we were, on a stolen Zero heading from Felicity to somewhere northwest of Las Vegas. I said over and over that the Zero only had a range of like, 70 miles. His rebuttal was that he had a special solar charger. When I asked him what good a solar charger was gonna do us in the middle of the desert at three am, he just kind of smiled. "Not that kind of solar charger, George."

"Only a little further. I just received a telepathic image from the Zetoxians", he shouted as the MMX zoomed along the highway.

Then slowed. A flashing red light showed the battery was next to dead.

The headlights switched off. "Gotta save some juice!" He never took his eyes off the horizon. You had to admire the crazy fool in some ways. Now the total blackness, before only lurking in the brush on the side of the road, swallowed us whole. Four minutes later, the bike came to a complete halt.

"Damn," he muttered. Now that the wind was gone, I could hear him clearly in the vacuous expanse of sand and night. It was weird. The dust sucked up all sound so there wasn't even the faintest echo. He pulled a long, matte, cylindrical object from his coat and began pointing it at random into the sky.

"Look man, let's just start walking back. We'll tell 'em... hell I don't know, but we've got about a two-days' walk to figure it out on."

"No chance. I ain't goin back. 'Burn 'im! Burn 'im at the stake!' I can already hear 'em!"

"Look man, no one's gonna burn you at the stake." I looked down at the pin for buddybelt. For a moment, I thought about yanking it out right there.

Just then, out of the sky came the most brilliant beam of light I'd ever seen. A circle with a radius of about 25 meters blazed like Lahaina Noon; everything looked like one of those early CGI sequences. My deranged partner dropped to his knees in what I took to be prayer. I, however, aimed and burned through about 400 of the .90 caliber rounds.

The flying saucer tried to shoot off, then dipped one side, went all squirrely and crashed into a desert bluff. His jaw slack, eyes huge and glistening, "But... Wha- Wh- Why- H- ..."

From the direction of the wreckage, a scorched Mr. Slate dragged himself across the rocky waste. Stomping quickly up from behind was Mr. Spacely himself. "JEEEEETTTTSSSOONNNNNN" he roared.

The Musician

There he sat,
in his tub,
stormy melodies brewing forthwith,
from a maritime hubbub.

The flutes he filled,
with utmost care,
a symphony of his own devising,
almost coalescing there.

"Are you done? Are you done?"
came the clatter,
forth from the maw,
of his urmother's son.

"Dad, I'm in this tub!"
came the rebuttle,
"Am I in this tub composing?
What be'ist thou's trouble?"

But Dad didn't liken,
to his progeny's disdain,
stormed the closet,
wishing that clamour to contain.

"I give thee flutes,
for bathtime fun,

now you menace my household,
and your mock-mass is done."

Forth from the sea didst a stream erupt,
the youth not wavering,
"Dad you're washed up!"
And the bubbles did roil.

Pennywhistles, tin drums and ersatz music,
came from some unfathomable depth,
unfathomable! The tub itself,
a shallow vertical breadth.

Dad shaking, quaking
with water in face,
"Boy you've squirted me the last time!
I'll be the last you debase!"

And forth from the bath,
the stopper the father did revoke,
in maelstrom of ire-ous wrath,
didst leave the musician to soak.

Things That Are, but Aren't

A face reflected in the water above your own when bobbing for apples. It's not one of the children at the party...

A Baroque string quartet called, "The Chamber Pot".

Shepherd's Canyon, which can only be reached by a forty-five-day drive, and where the sun can be seen setting in the west, and rising from the east, simultaneously.

Taking a bite from an apple in a mirror, it is said that you'll see a vision of your future husband smiling over your shoulder.

A computer in the third-grade classroom. During parent-conference night, you pass by the open door and glance at a scan of a newspaper displayed on the monitor. A young man's photo next to the headline, "Tumor from Mars!"

A t-shirt showing the phrase, "Death Is Just Birth in Reverse" or a picture of a realistic bear attack with the words, "Focaccia Birthday!"

The idea that a lower-case 4 looks similar to an upper-case 7.

Boon-Boon, the visitor from the Bonobo planet, saying, "What's up with all the no hair?", when stepping off his rocket.

The sister of the green children of Woolpit marrying and being an ancestor of the Robinsons of Manassas, Virginia.

And likely, you've never heard of Justin Timberlake's hit album, "Just in Case", have you?

The line, "You're touching the top of my red leg!", from the famous film by the brothers Benn and Runn Dauver, "Decimal Expansion of Khintchine's Constant", never has been.

And somewhere, there is an abandoned residential building, perhaps in the outskirts of Ashgabat; where, in its dilapidated basement, there is an albino man with alopecia, stuck in a crawlspace, grinning in a sinister way that has never existed.

I also recall a mirror deep within a dream that was within a dream. That, and looking into a mirror in a room that was pitch black (no apples this time).

Uncle Dingbat Wireless

Did you know there's an invisible planet between Mars and the asteroid belt that orbits the sun much faster and in the opposite direction? Scientists have yet to discover it.

A bedside lamp with a momentary "off" switch.

Crevasse

"Why would we pay that kind of price?!"

"Look, that's the regular price, what you'd pay if it were the high season. I haven't told you the sale prices yet."

"I don't care what the sale prices are. I wouldn't pay you squat. You're nuts or something mister."

"Really, it's a great deal see." I told him the price for adults and for ages 6 and under. "Tell you what, I shouldn't do this but I'll let the baby in for free. That ain't bad! You won't find prices like that anywhere else."

"This must be some kind of joke. I'm here to take my family for a nature walk. If you think for one mo-"

"Honey, maybe we should take his offer. He's probably right; I don't think we'll find anything cheaper."

I licked my lips and took a step closer. "She's right you know. Nobody else is gonna let you in on a deal like th-"

"Wait just one second! Have you lost it?" He looked at his wife who was already starting to open her purse. "We're not paying him to fall into that crevasse! We wouldn't do it if it was free! Put that away; let's go!"

He stomped off up the path. The wife, reluctantly zipping her bag, made an attempt at a smile then turned and started after her husband, hitching up the backpack with the baby.

Darn close, I thought. I'd been doing this job for close to a month now and hadn't had much success. They said it'd be easy pickins, that people would be practically jumping over each other to fall into this crevasse. It wasn't like they said though. I figured I'd have to change up my strategy and started foraging around for branches.

About an hour later I heard some dusty boots coming up the trail. I set down a rather large branch and wiped the sweat from my forehead. I pulled a protein bar out of my pack and sat on a large rock I'd rolled over in the morning. Coming around a bend in the path was a park ranger.

"Howdy there young feller. Takin' a break from the hike?"

"No. I've been out here a while." I said around a mouthful of oatmeal.

The park ranger looked around and saw the branches I'd been piling up. "Looks like it. Whatcha workin' on here?"

I glanced over my shoulder, then looked back at the ranger. "Piling up branches," I said.

"I can see that son! What fer?"

"I'm trying to trick people into falling into that crevasse," I gestured backward with my thumb.

"Ho ho! Devil's Maw! I was just gonna tell you to watch out since yer spendin' so much time around here." A scream from the pit cut him off: my only customer of that morning. From the sound of her

voice, she was wedged about 30 feet down and had just regained consciousness. "I'll leave you to it then. Say, what are you charging folks these days?"

I told him the prices and he let out a long, low whistle. "Not on what I get paid, I'll tell ya' that!" He took a longing look at the half-covered opening and, seeming just to make sure, rustled one hand around in his pocket. "Some other day maybe. You take care now." I waved and he went on ahead, those dusty boots kicking an acorn. Back to work, I thought.

Just then a bright yellow school bus, loaded with children, came crashing wildly out of the trees. It was racing directly toward me, the children's heads sticking out the windows, their eyes huge, mouths open, the bus driver frantically slashing her arm as if to say "get out of the way!"

A New Drug

"Hey man, it's no pro. Don't sweat it!" He tapped his thumb knuckle on the leather steering wheel in time to the music. "Driving like this, I feel freer than I would down at the shop. Know what I mean?"

I guess I did. Hank and Blip had been buddies for as long as I could remember. It was kind of like having two older brothers. Hank hadn't been around for a while, but he showed up again in the spring, and already had back his usual tan.

"-one that won't make me sick, one that won't make me crash my car, or make me feel three feet thick," the synthesized bassline rolled under Huey's tenor rumbling out of the speakers.

"You sure are quiet kid. But I guess you're pretty nervous. That's how I felt too, the first time I left home..." Hank gazed ahead with a pensive stare. I felt like I was looking in a mirror.

A sign on the side of the road said another 41 miles before the airport. Hank lifted the can he'd been sneaking snarfs out of and ducked his head, gripping the 100 CD spindle between his thighs. They both shook as the Wrangler went over a bump.

"Too bad it's got to be now. Surfing season just started. I was hoping you'd be around, and it could be just like the old days."

"Yeah. Well you're... back," I managed. "Blip's probably taking this whole thing harder."

I was going to say something about dad, but the CD started skipping.

"One that won't make me nervous, wondering what to do. One that makes me feel like I f- f- I f- f I- f- f- f- f- - --" Hank butted the heel of his hand against the dash. "feel when I'm with yoooouuuuu!!!!"

"Don't worry, I'll take care of Blip and the record shop while I'm at it. You just focus on what you need to right now. Everything'll be fine. Ol' Hank's back in town."

I hoped he was right. It was gonna be bad enough dealing with dad after his most recent bandsaw incident. Damnit, why couldn't he just leave those pine-wood derbies alone?

Neither of us said much. The jeep sped along the coastal highway. Hank stayed in the left-, which gave us a pretty clear view of the beaches below. The song ended, and the next track of the CD came on. The same opening electric guitar slides blasted out of the Kenwood stereo.

I don't think I ever met anyone who loved that song as much as Hank. It was one of those tunes that really took me back. I watched the digital display on the head unit ratchet up a digit with each repetition, ticking away what little time we had left.

"when I'm aloooooooooone with with with with with w- w- - "

"Damn!" This time Hank pressed the eject button and while the disc spat out, took a swig of the beer.

"Here kid, hold this." He passed me the can and grabbed the CD before tossing it out of the passenger window. I remembered finding a CD on the side of the road once, wondering what it would have sounded like had it not been so shredded by the highway-shoulder Yakuza.

I ducked down and took a sip of the beer myself. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hank lifting several discs off the spindle, inspecting them for scratches, each one with the same "I Want a New Drug" scribbled in black sharpie over the Maxwell logo. The display read the 12 tracks then jolted the speakers with the exact same squeals as before.

Yeah. Things are gonna be just fine, I thought as the car veered through oncoming traffic and Lewis' breezy vocal cadence accompanied our 700 foot plummet down the sheer drop on the other side of road.

The Fight

"It's right there on the counter."

She laughed.

"Very funny. I worked hard for that."

"You haven't worked hard. You've been sitting on the couch."

"I'm sitting on the couch now, bec-"

"You've been sitting on the couch since I left this morning."

"..."

It was pointless. Saying anything would make it worse. He figured saying nothing would make it worse too, but decided to give it a try.

"I can't live with you. I just needed someone to give me a pencilobuum shot. Maybe that's why you don't have any friends."

"..."

"You know I've been sick. Look! Three of my fingers rotted off this morning. I thought coming to Zab would be a new start for us. I'm the only one living here. Look at me: only one good eye left! The doctor said I'm lucky the gangrene hasn't gotten to my brain. I get up go to..."

Maybe it had though. He didn't think it was a good idea to say so, nor mention the scorpions that had been stinging him since Tuesday.

"... and then the anvil fell on three of my coworkers, my jet ski never got here..."

He tried. He really had. He'd gone out and gotten her the illegal Taiwanese poison. She wouldn't stop talking about her new boss and how useless he was. She'd only woken up and started working a week and a half ago. They'd lost a lot of time enroute after being sucked into the blackhole and the rage it induced put her into an apoplectic coma for the first four months after arriving. Four months during which he took care of everything on top of fighting off the dingoes. He hadn't slept a wink. Even so, when it was her turn to complain, he listened patiently. Every evening before the dark came...

"You don't care about me! I hope the dingoes get you tonight! I'm going to bed!" She aimed a poison dart at his face, which missed, burning a hole straight through the wall to the neighboring hovel.

At least he hadn't fought back.

He didn't get it really. He was trying to help. It might not have helped, but it was a gesture of aid. What he got in return was another attack. Oh well.

Shortly thereafter, dingoes came and bit off his legs.

The Very Ugly Duckling

In the full glare of summer's savage blaze, a menacing egg lay beneath an ominous bulrush.

When vicious day turned to blackest night, and bloodthirsty moon rose above endless, sable ocean -pop- out of the egg emanated a hideous, bumbling, useless to all the world duckling.

He was indeed very hideous and dead set upon wrecking a most heinous and howling hunger upon the Earth.

On Monday, he devoured a 1967 Rolls Royce Silver Shadow, but he was still ugly.

On Tuesday, he ate through two abandoned Schwinn bicycles (once cherished by a Cape Code retiree couple), grisly as before.

On Wednesday, he ate through Dracula's Candelabra, but was still all fearsome and full of dread.

On Thursday, he ate a large section of the Eiffel Tower, more grim and vile than the day last.

On Friday, he ate Oscar Wilde's iron deathbed in L'Hotel d'Alsace, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris. Fortunate was the barren, arid world that not one human soul remained to witness his disfigurement.

On Saturday, he ate through:

Division by zero,

Season 7 of Harry Potter,

Tony,

The sentience of 6 dirt bikes fused into a golden, talking, magical mantle clock,

The time in history known as the Geometric Period,

a coffin,

a ceiling fan containing the soul of Michel Lotito,

Sector 19,

<unknown>,

and all the endless expanse of sand and dust at the end of time. That night he had a terrible nightmare.

The next day was Sunday again. The duckling ate through one of Jupiter's smaller moons, and after that, felt much better.

Now he wasn't hungry anymore, nor ugly, more like a big, beautiful minivan.

He built a smouldering house, called a Hadean Wolfsegg, around himself. He stayed inside until the sun burned itself to a cinder, then nibbled a pitch swathe in the cocoon, burst his way out and was...

A Union Pacific Big Boy 4014 Locomotive! Toot Toot!

The Real Way Van Gogh Died

Was in a hot tub, choking on a sub.

That's it, nothing romantic about it.

All the stories about how he had killed all three of his brothers, just for fun
before blowing off his own face with a 12-gauge,
make-believe fantasies by wimpo nerds...

And did you know his real name wasn't even Van Gogh?

It was Vincent!

The whole story about him slicing off his dick and sending it to a titty-mama?

Totally false. It was actually his toenails, all six of them.

But he only had one stamp and the male man said he needed one for each,
so Van Gogh just ate the rest.

Van Gogh didn't even have any ears to begin with.

And get this, Van Gogh never ate lead paint;

it was actually PIZZA!

But what really gets me off is this whole load about his family destroying his paintings,
using them as toilet paper for heavy diarrhea.

Van Gogh only ever painted one painting, and it wasn't even very good.

I think Van Gogh's Grandpa used it to suffocate himself.

Finally, did you know that Van Gogh was a gay werewolf?

Van Gogh? More like Boghzogh!



(My Trip to Granpy's House, courtesy of the Kim Il Sung Collection)

Van Winkle

It was a Sunday like any other. No work, no obligations and NO church (not anymore, not after he'd learned the TRUTH about that one parishioner, Omni Romnox). He and the wife were going to check out some local yard sales. He'd been looking forward to it all week. At least he would enjoy it, and it's not like they were still LEGALLY married anyways. He eyed the mantle clocks in the living room. Not a single one showing the same time, perfect, a testament to his skill of keeping her OUT of his business. The racket was overwhelming, two hundred and forty-seven mantle clocks all going at it at the same time. I'm sure you can imagine; he could barely hear the invisible party boat passing by, blaring that trash they call music these days.

Strapping themselves in the car (he insisted they both wear five-point harnesses), he had a good feeling. Rip Van Winkle's mantle clock was out there and sooner or later it'd be his. Today felt like it could be his lucky day.

He remote-viewed several of the neighborhood lawns. Too hazy still. Better get a move on. Ok... backup cams. No brats on tricycles behind them, no piles of leaves concealing neighborhood kids, not THIS time, damnit. They started to back up and the wife suddenly grasped the dash.

He stopped the car suddenly. "What is it now?" He eyed her greasy palm prints on the brushed aluminum. *I'll have to electrify it sometime soon*, he thought.

"Don't you feel like we're forgetting something?" she asked.

"Like what? Like the time on the VCR?" he snorted. "We sold that twenty years ago Charlene." He shook his head and the car started rolling backward again as he lifted his foot off the brake pedal.

"Stop! No. Wait- No, of course not. Right. It's just, I feel like we forgot something."

He sighed, picturing some butterfingers housewife (in his imagination she looked uncannily like Charlene). *How much is this? Whoops!* He actually slapped his hand on his forehead, as the mantle clock in his vision dashed to pieces on the sidewalk.

"Can we at least check the mailbox?"

"The mailbox? Look Charlene, at this rate it'll be twelve thirty by the time we get out of the driveway. There's no mail on Sundays. Meanwhile, some little punk is building a leaf pile behind the car, hiding in there!"

"Is it Sunday? I'm sorry Hank. You know I get confused... with you always changing the clocks, the calendars..."

Excuse me sir, I'll give you twenty bucks for this mantle clock. Gee, she sure is a beaut'! He cringed, hard enough for her to notice.

"Hank, are you okay? Is everything all ri-"

"Charlene I'm fine! Can we just get a move on?!"

"Ok Hank, you know best," she whimpered.

As they rolled their minivan down the neighborhood streets, it started nagging him too. Something seemed off. They passed the first of the yard-sales.

"Hank, hang on! Didn't you see that tea service? That looked like real silver!"

"No, that one's no good. That's shit," he grumbled.

"Hank!" she gasped.

He hunched his shoulders and drove on in silence. There was definitely something missing. Damn her, he thought; not now, damnit!

When they came to a cul-de-sac, he turned the car around, stomping the gas and screeching the tires. He squinted and eyed the road ahead for any hooligans on skateboards or those trick-bikes. He imagined them losing control and sliding right under the wheels, the looks of terror on his and Charlene's faces as they crunched over yet another smiling neighborhood kid.

"Hank, did we remember to lock the front door? Was that it?"

He didn't answer, just continued ahead, the car now doing close to 40, trying to maintain some semblance of reason. They'd locked the doors. He was sure about that. Fifteen minutes before she'd come out of the bathroom he'd gone around and around the house, checking and rechecking each door.

Wait a second. There! He'd seen it. He couldn't believe it, but that was it! Abruptly, he began clawing at the release mechanism of the harness. The dull golden-brown woodwork, the matte-green face, reminiscent of some pastoral scene, caught his eye in the Longsmith's. He fumbled with the door's handle, then toppled out onto the pavement, great sheets of skin peeling off with his impact on the road. His clothes ripped to tatters, he dragged himself across the asphalt toward the curb, now nearly naked and horribly injured as the car rolled on, Charlene still trapped inside and horrified as the minivan sped ahead on a direct course to trample over the high-school lacrosse team as it crossed the road.

Worst Nightmare

"But you said it would be okay if I took one!"

"Yes. One! And that was before I knew you'd been taking them this whole time."

"Listen, I'm sorry, but I was hungry."

"If you were so hungry, why didn't you just have some taquitos?"

"Why should I eat taquitos when you specifically said 'help yourself to the cookies'?"

"I never said that! I was saving those for a reason."

"Yah, what reason was that?!"

"It's... not important! Listen, it's not just the cookies, I know you've been taking all kinds of stuff."

"Exactly, like you said, 'Help yourself'!"

"No! Jesus! I just told you; I was saving that stuff!"

"What's with you and saving?"

"I uhm, you know, just like, I get in the mood for certain things... right?"

"No, I don't know. What's really going on here?"

"Doris, hey, umm. Wait a second. C'mon! Don't turn this around on me. I know you have piles of money in that top hat of yours, why come u no buy your own groceries?"

"Well maybe if I had a snowmobile, or even a single roller skate, but can you imagine me coming home with 12 bags of groceries?! On ONE roller skate?!"

"You're not making any sense."

"You say that all the time, but it doesn't work, because *I'm* making sense!"

"God, why me?"

"Shut up, George. Look, these animal crackers have been in here for ages and they're still unopened. I think they're expired. You know, I see something like this and think, 'these are mine now because they're free and I want them!' and you know what George? I'm right!"

"I'm saving those!"

"For what?!"

"Uhhh, errr, you know, for when, ..., Hey! Want to look at the picture of the elephant? See how cute he is?"

"No George, I don't see. What grown woman wants to look at a picture of an elephant on an animal cracker box? Now who's the one not making sense?"

"Ummm, I guess / like looking at it."

"I don't think so, I think there's more going on here..."

"Really, there isn't, I s-swear it!"

"What's behind your back?! Show it to me."

"Ehh, there's nothing behind m-my back..."

"What is it! I know you're hiding something..."

"Doris, really, it's nothing, not a big deal."

"Gimme that!"

"Urrghhhghh!"

"Oh my god, George..."

"Give it back!"

"George..."

"What, it's no big deal. Hey come on. It's no big deal!"

"A TURKEY LEG?!"

"..."

"Where did you get that?!"

"Well, it's just, I saw Lukas the other day and..."

"I can't believe you George! This is incredible!"

"Just let me explain."

"No George, YOU explain!"

"What?"

"What else have you been hiding from me? Let's go take a look in your room, shall we?!"

"No please Doris! There's nothing in there, really!"

"Fine, then you won't mind me looking."

"..."

"What's that smell?"

"Must be my roast chicken or the leftover spiral ham..."

"It doesn't smell like either of those to me..."

"NO DORIS DON'T GO IN THERE!!"

::gasp::

"I told you Doris, it was for your own good!"

"..."

"Please don't be too angry."

"..."

"I'm so sorry Doris, I really am!"

"You expect me to accept your apology?"

"Please!"

"I j-just can't believe how much turkey there is..."

"..."

"How long has this been going on for?"

"Since ::sniff:: about ::sniff:: Thanksgiving."

"I just... can't believe this..."

"Oh God! I have a problem."

"Really George, Turkey?!"

"I can change. I swear!"

"No, this has gone too far. I'm kicking you out."

"B-b-but Doris! This is my apartment...? You can't!"

"Oh, I certainly can, and I will! You have two weeks to pack your bags, and then I want you out!"

"::sniffle:: Well ::sniffle:: can I at least bring the turkey?"

"!!!"

"..."

"BRING THE TURKEY!!!!!!!!!"

::cowers::

"OUT! OUT! OUT!"

"Doris please! I'm begging you!"

"Get out of MY HOUSE!"

::attempts to grab a wing:: "Okay Doris, I'm g-going..."

"You put that down!"

::tries to take a bite::

"Put it down!!"

"Sure, sure, I'll put it down." ::takes another bite::

"You have three seconds to drop that turkey wing!"

::gets up:: ::runs::

"Get back here!"

"I'll go but let me take this wing."

"NEVER!"

"Yikes!"

"Come back here, don't you leave with that turkey wing!"

"I'm sorry Doris, I truly am..." ::takes a bite:: "I need help, I know I do, just not right now."

"Wait George, please don't leave. I changed my mind! We can work together, I'm sorry for being so mad!"

"I'm sorry too Doris, goodbye" ::thumbs up::

And that's the story of how I got all the turkey! Mmmm, it took me weeks to finish it all. Turkey pie, turkey soup, turkey sandwiches! Haha! You might even say I was stuffed! Well, it's been 2 years since that day, exactly. I've heard a few things here and there about George. It seems she landed herself in gaol on charges of possession. There was a time when I would have tried to clean George up of her turkey addiction, but she was just too stubborn. ::licks fingers:: That's why I became a counselor, I spend my days with the inner-city youths, trying to keep them off the stuff. It's a tricky road for most of them, but seeing those kids stay sober, it's really rewarding to me, and I think it's pretty rewarding for me too. A word of advice to anyone out there thinking of trying a tender strip or a juicy slice: plug one end of an Ethernet cable into the Ethernet or LAN port on the back of the modem, then plug the other end into the Ethernet port on the back of your computer. Your modem should come with an Ethernet cable, but any old Ethernet cable will probably do.

It crashed right through the wall. Zarg saw it happen. He wasn't supposed to be in Diane's apartment, but there he was, arms loaded with frilly underthings, hastily grabbed digging through the ol' chest o' drawers.

Those at street level heard the commotion moments before, then great chunks of brick came tumbling down from the third story facade. Double plus ungood was the communal thought.

Zarg wondered what it was after. The Chopper usually appeared at the very conception of cogitation and here he'd been dreaming of Diane's nightwear for weeks. After the first fantasy, slingshotting himself in a giant brazier straight between Diane's thighs, Zarg jerked his head back and forth in a terrible fear. Silent moments of horror ticked by, gradually replaced by minutes, and when the Chopper never came, though his heart still pumped rapidly, Zarg could once again affirm the perseverance of reality around him.

The second came more naturally, after the first blush as they say... Both were arcing lazily in matched lace panty lawn swings, the scene reminiscent of Rococo, perhaps a François Boucher. Diane was laughing, nude of course, as was Zarg. Several olive-skinned men looked on, their faces gay and mirthful. They appeared to be Phillip the Latter and Phillip the Dark. A washer woman paced by, her ample bust spilling from the linen toga. And then SNAP, Zarg remembered where he was, prone on his cot, staring in disbelief at his monumental foolishness as the Roomba Courtesy Android whizzed past, banged into a table leg, and zoomed off cursing. Now he had violated Thought Ordinance 27 twice in the same sub-solar period. He was doomed, the thought-entity Darren would never forgive him this repeat offense. Yet as Zarg's throat-mounted Debit Dial counted down his remaining life-dollars, nothing came to pass. *All-right!* thought Zarg as he thrust his hand right back into his synthe-pantaloons.

The days followed thusly. In moments of idleness Zarg found himself time and time again occupied by thoughts of hosiery, bikinis, G-strings, fishnet stockings, knee-highs, you name it. It wasn't long before Zarg was actively conjuring these fancies. No harm no foul right?

Meanwhile, somewhere deep beneath a mountain in Utah, a Desolation era supercomputer silently ticked the violations off, one by one compounding Zarg's apocryphal tab.

Finally, standing beneath her rounded balcony, Zarg got it into his head that: A) Darren didn't view the aberrances as actual thoughtcrimes or B) Zarg was somehow SPECIAL and either Darren didn't know, or he was pardoned by some inherent trait of his SPECIALNESS.

Anyways, he waited until a Roomba exited through the front door, spitting at it in token luddite fashion even as it bid him goodday, before slipping in and ascending the stairs. Zarg used his government-mandated McDonald's gift card to jimmy the lock, and there he was, dead center in the omphalos of his desire.

Simultaneously, a cerebrax, so named for his customary brain headware, dispatched a Chopper to the coordinates. He made the customary gestures, snapping a peanut for Darren, and saying hello to Captain Morgan, as was his reward. The purging of the sex dukes had left at least that...

Not much else can be said for poor Zarg. The Chopper got him, as it gets everyone, and Diane never found out what happened. All she knew was that at work one day she received a voucher for the Homeovat and spent the night there, unable to delay her gratification. Upon returning home she found everything just how she'd left it, save an ancient crinoline, gifted to her by a grandparent on her maternal side, a small cameo of a woman with a fan hanging from one of the petticoats.

Unbeknownst to her was how Zarg had hidden the solution for the 4D Smooth Poincaré Conjecture, the only weapon which Darren feared, into the portrait's curves.

Boon-boon

Boon-boon, the visitor from the Bonobo planet, stepped off his rocket and said, "What's up with all the no-hair?"

The president took him by the arm, "No-y no-y, Boon-boon. On Earth, people have-y no hair. See?" The president took off his cyber cap to show Boon-boon the smooth dome underneath.

Boon-boon went berserk, ripping off his spacesuit and furiously beating his fists against his muscular chest before jumping on the conference table. Several of the representatives seated around lurched back in fear, which Boon-boon saw as cowardice, ray-gunning the one he perceived to be the weakest.

This calmed Boon-boon. His breathing returned to normal, and his chest ceased heaving so violently. Slowly, his composure stabilized, and a new space suit (and a fresh diaper) materialized itself around him.

"Okey dokey Boon-boon. You sit-y down now. We very want talky you." The president gestured over his shoulder and a man wearing shades walked to the ash pile left behind by the Sri Lankan with a dust-buster.

"Boon-boon want banana?" The president took out a fresh one, already peeled, from his trouser pocket. Boon-boon quickly grasped it and socketed it into his throat.

The room lights darkened and from the center of the table sputtered a holographic star chart. Taking advantage of the moment when everyone's eyes adjusted, several of the delegates quickly donned their ape masks and zipped up the hirsuits.

One of them stood. "The area being shown, which I'm sure we're all familiar with here today, is a section of the Del Monte cluster. The problems we are facing there now are the same that we have always faced with the Orangutanuloids."

The president glanced over and saw a vague expression from Boon-boon and a wrinkled forehead. Looking meaningfully at the speaker from before, he held his arms out wide at his sides, hands dropping down and made scratching gestures toward his armpits.

"Oh, right!" The man paused, then pitched his voice down an octave. "Bad bad Orangutanuloids. No-y want give give with Earthmen," this last phrase said while jabbing a hairy finger at the suit.

"That's right Boon-boon," said the president. "Dole, you remember the Dole Fruit Company, right? Orangutanuloids very bad. Kill many Dole Fruit Company Employees."

In the hologram, the star formation changed as a massive bosonic field impinged on a rotating black hole and then amplified through superradiant scattering. Boon-boon, who saw this as yet another Ciénaga, yawned and wondered where they got their protein if they had no hair for parasites to live in.

"Boon-boon help Earthmen. Earthmen make many banana. Many banana for Boon-boon."

Yeah right, thought Boon-boon. The people of the Bonobo planet had first come to Earth knowing full well that it was primarily a banana growing civilization. Earthlings, or as they were more commonly

known, "Chiquitans", had early in their history stumbled upon at-the-time novel military technology which they used to bully neighboring systems into cheap labor. Cheap labor was good though, as it turned out, for it was used to grow the prized Cavendish banana, highly sought after as a galactic commodity since only the Chiquitans knew how to engineer it.

Sure, they loved a good Cavendish just like any other simian, but they had their own, slightly inferior, banana species that was gaining popularity as the humans' mischief wreaked havoc around the sector. Their intimidation tactics and subterfuge techniques cost lives, artificially inflating the value of their cardinal asset, and while its brute-force application remained effective, their weapons technology was outdated and anachronistic in the face of modern Casimir Effects and bubble-wall propagation.

Boon-boon was not here to entertain any notions of collaboration anyways. He had been sent as an emissary to unravel another manifestation of human chicanery altogether.

"Mr. President, there is very little my people can offer you in this matter. My only..." Boon-boon consulted a translator, "bailiwick here is a matter concerning something said at a recent trade-summit which my race did not have the pleasure of attending."

The president smiled appeasingly. "Listen Boon-boon. You tell us how to move from a meta-stable state to a stable one and I'll give you a whole heap of goldfingers!"

"No chance, Tedric."

Tedric gulped and glanced nervously around the room.

"As you know, yourselves fellow hominoidea, such a distinction is vital. We do not have your so-called jokes on my home world, so you'll have to forgive what must seem to you like utterly infantile stupidity."

Several delegates rose, turning nervously and making like bananas.

"But could you please remind me and my fellow Bonobulons, who, I might add, wait in orbit around this and many of your major trading worlds with false-vacuum-state field stabilizers, what again was the," dramatic pause as Boon-boon consulted idioms on his iPhone, "punchline to 'Who are the keys that can open mankind's bananas?'"

Concluded

Michael Collins awoke with a thunderous headache. He first raised his hand and felt the enormous hematoma there before any other sensation reached him. Slowly, in hazy focus, came the metallic fixtures of his surroundings. A smell like ozone filtered into his sinuses. He tried to put the pieces together. Where was he? What was the last thing he remembered. He searched. A bronze funnel, like some kind of swirling portal reflecting his helmeted face back to him... That's right, he thought, it was the final moment of the countdown. Then that means...

From overhead came the ominous scratching of something on the hull of the ship. Suddenly alert, Collins sat bolt upright. Like an aqua rocket's insides pressurized with ice water, Collins felt fear overwhelm him. He wanted to scream, he wanted to run, but he knew there was nowhere for him to go. No one to hear him. Floating there, lifeless, was the only other person he could have turned to. Buzz's face pale alabaster, dried blood clinging to his ears.

...sccrrrr-rr-scccc.... came the sound again. He was the Lunar Orbiter Command Module pilot. He knew the ship inside and out and that whatever it was was scrambling around somewhere he couldn't get to, which meant to him that what he was hearing was impossible. No human, no living creature of God's creation could survive out there where the sounds were coming from.

He tried the radio. Frozen silence. Wires splayed through the air, shredded, sending off sparks, no longer capable of conveying the electrical signals they were meant to. Before swearing, before crossing himself, before joining his hands in a gesture of prayer came the thought:

Houston... We have a problem.

clank The noise bolted from one side of his periphery to the other. A conduit box dislodged with force from where it had been loosely tethered on the bulkhead, spinning wildly down onto Collins' leg. Blinding pain came first, then a tumult of glistening red drops floated into the spaceship. He grasped the wound and rocked himself back and forth. Anger, disgust, panic, claustrophobia... So, this is what it's come to. Alone up here. Alone to die.

But of course, it was much worse than that. He wasn't alone at all...

* * *

The hatch was unlocked. It took a monumental act of courage to do it, as had the prior work he'd spent the last ninety minutes completing. Monumental courage and monumental strength. His leg was splinted with two pipes he'd ripped out of the ship's lifeless shell. In better days these pipes would have carried liquid coolant upon re-entry, days that Michael knew would not come to pass. A portion of the electrical system was rewired to activate the release mechanism of the lander module. He'd found the hydraulic tanks to be one of the few functioning bits of gear on the ship, meaning that -he- must have

plans for them. ...sccrrrr-sccrr... the sound came, louder than before. He was being toyed with, like the orca toys with the walrus. Sooner or later though, the time would come, and only one would be left to swim in the vast emptiness of interplanetary space.

sccRRR-scCCRRR. Closer. sCCRRR-SCRRRR! It was almost by the hatch. SCCRRRR!!! The hatch blew open and debris flew everywhere. There was no way to see. Escaping air and detritus blinded Collins. A shape loomed toward him. *Now or never!* shrieked Collins' thoughts. He grabbed the body and flung it downward with all his might, the counterforce propelling him hard against the ceiling of the orbiter module. For a terrifying instant Collins' world went white with agony. How long had it lasted, was he too late? He grabbed the control box and plunged his gloved finger into the hole for the red button. The glove caught! He jabbed again and again but he couldn't depress it. Was this to be it then? Had he missed his chance? An arm flopped out of the lander module's door. Driven solely by terror and with no thought of self-preservation, Collins ripped off his glove, exposing his hand to the hard, deadly vacuum of space. He pushed the button.

The hatch of the lander module hydraulically sealed and detached from the command module. There was hardly any atmosphere left, but the airlock quickly snapped shut as the cabin tried to repressurize. Collins swam over to the EVA hatch and forced it to shut the rest of the way with his one good arm, rotating the manual lock. He slumped against the hull, too tired, too alone and too damn enervated to move anymore despite the adrenaline coursing around and around inside him. He lolled his head to the scuttle to look out. Like a supernumerary in a dream, there rotated the lander module, slowly distancing itself from the orbiter. Through its porthole Collins saw a corner of the limp spacesuit clad figure inside, it was the shoulder, there stitched the words... ALDRIN!?

Collins snapped around to see where the lifeless form of his partner dangled supposedly a moment before, but there was only the vast bell of a demon trumpet, one of those seven that would signal the breaking of the seals, the apocalypse for Collins had come, swallowing him up in its great brass flue.

"SURPRISE!!!!!!"

Cool

"Don't give him the cheerios! Do you want them all over the floorboard like last time?!"

We were on our way to Sapphire Island. I was riding in the middle of the backseat, Grimm and Fogg on either side. Dad was driving and Mom was doing double duty as both navigator and cooler jockey while Drippy and Ribbit sat in the middle.

"They can have some juice in fifteen minutes. I'm not stopping at every rest stop in the damn state!" Dad shouted.

Man, Dad was cool. Everything he said just came out so manly and grown up. I couldn't wait to be like Dad. I'd have my own blue minivan and I could say whatever I wanted.

"Grimm could you please tell your brother to STOP KICKING RIBBIT'S SEAT?!" Dad didn't even have to take his eyes off the road, barreling down the highway, one hand on the wheel, another on the tape deck's controls, just going at it with the buttons. Cool...

Like this one time, we were put in the back so that Dad could mow the front yard. Grimm, the oldest, had this idea. Peeking around the side of the house we could see Dad push the mower to the fence and back. *Man, that thing is cool*, I thought each time I saw it pass. Grimm wanted to get into the front yard and rile up ol' Pops, but I just wanted a better look at the mower.

We had Drippy stick his little hand through the fence and unhook the latch. Even if Dad could hear us over the racket of the mower, he was too preoccupied with the Coors can to notice us sneak up. He was holding it up in one hand shaking it over his head, one eye closed while the other inspected through the wide mouth. Cool, I thought.

But then my attention shifted to the mower. There it was, just rumbling in the yard. I watched it idle with the most intense gaze; I'd never seen anything like it. I had barely even known what cool meant before I saw that mower. It was blue, Dad's favorite color, and made this awful loud racket. I was floored.

Then Dad started shouting. "I thought I told you to put the kids out back!" Dad grabbed Grimm by his collar. "Shit! Am I the only one who does anything around here?"

I looked out the window at the passing traffic and smiled. I wanna be just like Dad I thought. Coming up on our left from behind was a big RED, cool semi. Grimm started jerking his arm up and down pointing at

the driver, who glanced to his right and then, eyes back on the road, raised his left arm and grasped the airhorn pull.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAA!

Dad almost swerved off the road while Grimm's Sode sloshed all over my lap. An instant later, Dad stabilized the blue Nissan Quest back into its lane, Drippy's nose bleeding where it thwoned against the side of the car and Mom gripping the dashboard and the armrest like a maniac.

"You kids are going to GET IT!" Dad was cooler than I'd EVER seen him! "When we get there, I'm gonna beat each one of your butts within an inch of your lives! Whose idea was it? Which one of you brats just tried to kill your whole family? I swear to God if your mother wasn't here, I'd drop you little turds on the side of the road. Oh god, what the heck happened to Drippy?" Dad's eyes were *flaming* hot! "Jesus Slipp! Stop grabbing the car and get back there and help your son! Holy moly! One of these days I'm going to drive this car off the road for real. Right into a tree! BANG! That'll teach you brats a lesson. I bet it was Grimm. He's YOUR favorite right Slipp? You treat him just like a gosh danged prince, like he's your perfect little angel. Well, this time I'm going to shove my foot so far up his hiney!"

Cool...

Tom Pa Leen

There was I, a bonkin' on my Tom Pa Leen.

Thence came she, a sight to be seen.

Hair a'splode, teeth all green,

disturb'n my bonk 'pon *my* Tom Pa Leen.

"Hey Tony, get down!" cam'st her scream,

face down, feet up, a'bonk on the screen,

strike'th'd her as weird, absurd or obscene,

did'st my bonkin' 'pon the Tom Pa Leen.

"How strange," said she "to bonk on your bean,"

"Wouldst thou not rather, Tony, to bonk on thy tarsus?"

Her slip thenst ended my fancy routine,

and ruinst it did the whole blasted scene.

"What doth thou want? Canst thou not glean,

my rollicking bounce 'pon new Tom Pa Leen?"

"'Tis not new Tony, long time a'bounce thou have been,

and sadly, 'tis tiresome, I must intervene."

"Go forth daffy bitch. Thinkst you you're the dean?

To tell me 'halt thou', like some silly queen?

Go out, and away, and with others convene!

Justine, Colleen; with Francine or Nadine!"

She stuck out her tongue, hated Irene,

turnt her back and did steam,

and thence went she, til' becamst she unseen,
and left me bonk alone, at peace, serene.
To bonk unperturbed 'ponst fair Tom Pa Leen.

Sally had an appointment with the staff makers Tuesday. Her husband, who she lies about having to everybody, had need of a new staff, or so she said, because his old one, which isn't real, had become oxidized, was fake, and needed replacing (though imaginary).

Happenstance Allabout, who *is* real, had worked for the staff maker Olim Trouseltart, who is also real, a real man that actually existed unlike some other men, since October. Before that she was a dancer and even before that a student at a real, accredited university. Mostly she liked the quiet calm of Olim's staff shop. The shop did no advertising and sat in a street, or rather an alley, that was most often overlooked save by the lost tourist or dumped kidnapping victim.

When Sally enters the shop, Happenstance looks up from her magazine, two aquamarine earrings swaying slightly from her delicate, honest-to-goodness, earlobes.

"Good afternoon, Miss Lambert, what brings you in today? Does your husband's staff need a good polishing?" blurts out Happenstance before she notices that Sally had walked in empty handed.

"If only. Mr. Lambert's staff perhaps has had a little too much polishing and now needs to be replaced," responds Sally.

"A new staff, yes. And will you be wanting the same model as before?" asks Happenstance.

"I'm afraid Mr. Lambert wants something a little more durable this time. Personally, I'd prefer he get one of those new, more slender models. Something with a little less girth might be a nice change," lies Sally.

"Yes, men are often concerned about getting a staff that will last, especially when they grow more, ehem, long in the tooth," remarks Happenstance.

At this, the corners of Sally's mouth make an almost imperceptible downturn. She continues, "Something similar to a Mastaff 9000 is the style he has been talking about. Of course, we wanted to come to you because my husband prefers a man's hands like Olim's working on his staff," sighs Sally lyingly.

"Well Miss Lambert, we certainly appreciate your patronage as well as your kind words. Mr. Trouseltart is unfortunately making a house call to the Dozlis'."

I want to interrupt here for a second and say what a great, respectable couple the Dozlis are. Mrs. Dozlis doesn't go around to bars telling men she has a husband just to get them to stop trying to take her home with them.

"It seems Mr. Dozlis' staff was warped when he left it outside overnight. Mr. Trouseltart is there seeing if he can get Mr. Dozlis' staff to straighten out again," says Happenstance.

"Do you happen to know how long he'll be out?" asks Sally repeatedly.

"Mr. Trouseltart has actually just called on the YesterdayPhone to tell me it is a particularly difficult staff to stiffen and that his hands will be busy all afternoon," responds Happenstance.

"Oh bother. Well in that case I shall go do my shopping today and will return tomorrow," says Sally.

Sally, who by no means has a husband, leaves Olim's staff shop and is immediately run over by a Swanrocket.

Four Cornered Pedro: The Director's Cut

It was the first day of a cold, cold winter when all of a sudden from the earth appeared a strange little man with a green four-cornered hat. It was odd that such a thing would happen because in this land the ground was made from solid gold, and it would have been hard for just anyone to be able to extract himself from an odd situation such as the one that the farmer witnessed. The little man decided that in order to reap the benefits that he was now entitled to, he would have to convince the farmer that the ground upon which he stood was made of solid gold, AND that it belonged to the little man. Of course, the land did belong to the little man, but that didn't stop him from trying.

"Hey, Mr. Farmer! What in Tar Nation are you doin' on my property?!" bellowed the little man.

"Why Pedro, you know quite well that this golden land is mine and that I'm not fixin' to share it with just anyone."

"Did you not see me appear from it, as if I could swim through solid gold?"

"I saw, but that does little to convince me that you are the true owner of this land!"

"What other man, beast, or spirit could so effortlessly move through a substance that stays together so well?"

"A mole moves through dirt but does not own the soil!"

"Aha, but dirt doesn't clasp itself together to keep from falling apart!"

"Yes, well, I guess you're Right Reverend Peter J. Lee. Or just right, as in correct."

"Ok, so hand over the land."

And at that the farmer took his hand and tried hard to stick it in the ground as if it were a spade.

"Ouch!," it obviously was not a spade. "You tricked me green-cornered Pedro!"

At this, Pedro laughed and laughed. He had finally accomplished his goal of tricking the farmer into sticking his hand into ground made of solid gold. Because Pedro had accomplished his task, he fell to the ground, cold as gazpacho and his soul drifted out of his body and into heaven above. If you're curious about why it was so important for Pedro to get farmer Dan to shove his hand into ground made of solid gold, you should read the prequel.

The Prequel

It was a late summer afternoon when Pedro decided to travel into town to pick up some peppers for a spicy batch of habanero piescicles that he was to make for his aunt Anita who would be visiting him the very next day. He was walking through town, minding his own business, when a mysterious gypsy approached him.

"You there. I will sell you this four-cornered hat if you make me a promise," she said.

"Why would I want that h-h-ha-aAa-at?"

"Don't you know what this hat can do?"

"No! Please tell me oh Great Gypsy!"

"Why should I? You have already done enough to yourself already," said the Gypsy.

"I don't know," said Pedro.

"Find me the most intelligent man in the village. He will know how to solve our problem."

So with that, Pedro went to find the most intelligent man in the village.

"Hey Pedro, can you help me fix a query?" rang a heavenly voice from the stables.

"Yes, I believe I can help you with whatever it is that you need help with."

"Well, you see Pedro... I'm nothing more than a simple cow-man-"

"Named Verona, might I add!" added Pedro. Actually, it was more of an interruption than an addition.

"Yes, well I was wondering, if it was po-"

At this, Pedro left the building on his merry way, and then the gypsy appeared from around the corner.

"Here, quick. Take this great and four-cornered hat-hat," said the gypsy, and because the gypsy had said the word "hat-hat", Pedro was forced, obviously, to take the, doomed, object she was offering him.

It was a hat very similar in size and color to those of local farmers in the region. This particular hat had been recovered in the mole-temple of Guarangaia.

Ehem

Guarangaia.

The following is a brief history of the hat:

Back during the time of dinosaurs, there was a fierce sense of competition and rivalry between the beasts of the land. This was also very much true of the time of pioneers, during which people argued mainly over which land they could settle. Being especially true of farmers, one can only speculate at the horror that took place during times of strife, otherwise known as the time of the Golden Land.

There was thus a Hat Rule to be established. This Hat Rule, which is very similar to governments of the world today, ordered that whoever possessed the hat was able to dictate the fate, boundaries and codes of the land. This hat so happened to be one of the four-cornered persuasion.

Nobody is exactly sure how it ended up in a temple many years later, but one thing is for certain, whoever would wear the hat would be subject to much ridicule and would be the most hideous being there is.

You may say to yourself, "What does that have to do with anything?" Well, that is exactly the point, because the natives of the temple knew absolutely nothing of the history, let alone the power, of the mysterious hat. Therefore, after many years of wondering and rumors, it was eventually agreed amongst the temple dwellers that the hat was indeed cursed because it never brought any prosperity to their land. It brought nothing. Nothing was regarded as a false-omen among these savage people. Much the way a mole lives in the dirt, yet sows no produce, did the people notice of that hat; it just sat mockingly in the temple, mysterious as if from God, yet it yielded no blessings. Therefore, it was deemed that whoever should wear the hat would be as a mole is, and that omen holds truth to this day.

The gypsy had obtained the hat at a most recent antique auction.

While Pedro was walking down the street to return to his house, he came across something very odd. It was a small red doll, so he picked it up and put it in his pocket.

When he walked a little further, a small girl came up to him and asked if he had seen a tiny blue piano. Pedro thought that this would be a good time to be clever, seeing as he had just recently acquired a very becoming hat, and had therefore replied, "No."

The little girl began to transform into an old woman. "Look what you've done to me! Because you would not return my little red doll, I can never go back to sleep again," she said. At that she turned into a beast and scurried off into a castle.

"Que Locura! That was almost as weird as a farmer trying to stick his hand into ground made of solid gold!"

When Pedro said this, a nearby musket came to life and said, "That was almost as weird as Spanish cuisine, or the word cuisine!"

All of the previous events brought much discontent and confusion to dear Pedro. Immediately he sought the consultation of the gypsy from whom he had so gullibly accepted the hat. After much deliberation, he sadly did not locate her. He decided it was time to do some research of his own.

Upon finding that there was no recorded history of the hat, he decided to make the best of the situation. What he discovered made him chuckle. The answer was so obvious, it amused him to think how he had missed it before. Only one thing could calm Pedro's restive soul, and that was of course, tricking Farmer Dan into shoving his hand into ground made of solid gold.

THE END

Recipe for Mole from Four-Cornered Pedro

Brief history of Mole:

There was once a devious pirate named Black John the John. He came to America seeking opportunity and found it in a small Japanese laundry shop. Black John the Macaroni Thief, as he liked to be called, greatly enjoyed this new experience and decided to tell a friend about it, but when he opened his mouth, all that came out were snakes and toads. He therefore went to the well to ask the fairy to make it stop, but fairies had long since left wells to live in luxury aircraft.

He fell in, and an Anglo-Saxon man walked by and promptly poured his tea into his pants. From this story, historians have deduced with almost total certainty the true origin of mole, its history being precisely the opposite of this most asinine tale.

Ingredients:

Choco-choco whizzers (one bagpipe full)

One bagpipe

Fresh Ripe Tomatoes

Purpose:

To prepare a delicious dish to enjoy with friends and silverbacks.

Hypothesis:

That the mole will be a great hit at this year's Tupperware extravaganza.

Directions:

Put the chocolate in a pot.

Add the bagpipe.

Juggle, and or jubble, the tomatoes until golden brown.

Promptly throw away the tomatoes and ask a homeless person to supply one week's earnings in gold. You will get much gold from the homeless.

Use the gold in this fashion:

Put the gold in palm.

Firmly compress palm so that the gold becomes invisible.

Get one 20-year-old electric guitarist, preferably with long hair, and insert the invisible gold into his ear.

Relax palm, making gold once again visible.

Withdraw gold from ear (You may have some difficulty as the ear canal can be a difficult canal to master).

When he says, "Nah-uh, how'd you do that dude?!", refuse to tell him, and pretend to hide in a canoe, pot or recently excavated burial chamber.

Focaccia Birthday

The highway ended there. No signs, no fences, it just stopped.

He looked over at his sleeping wife in the passenger seat.

Now's my chance! he thought.

Stepping out of the car, he felt the late autumn air swirl around him. It had been in his pocket since the last rest stop, and he hadn't been able to stop thinking about it. The little green tree, something he'd wanted since he was a kid. He hesitated, then began to pull the paper off the top, the plastic crinkling as he ripped it off the staple.

"What the hell is that?!"

He jerked his gaze back toward the car, the interior light on and the passenger door ajar. She stood there with a threatening look, and he took off running.

He hadn't noticed the state of the road's disrepair until he stumbled in a pothole, wrenching his ankle in the process.

"GEEEEARRRGH!!!"

Hot steam boiled out of the pit, scorching his leg, but there was no time to stop.

He hobbled up and made it to the far side of the road, where pines and the darkness between swallowed him up. His wife looked on with disgust.

Thirty minutes of scrambling through the undergrowth and he suddenly found himself in a clearing. The moon hung overhead, looming behind clouds darker than the sky. Breathing hard, he gripped it in his right hand. The stillness of the clearing amplified his ragged breathing. *Stupid*, he thought. *Too soon*. Although he'd never do it, he'd probably be better off throwing it in that trash can.

Trash can!? Wait a second, why would there be a trash can here of all places. He approached. Centralia Sanitation Department it read. Something sinister about it. Do I go back? In the end, he figured, staying was less dangerous than returning. Even if he could find his way back to the car, wouldn't it be better to lay low for a couple weeks?

What a weird trashcan. He ripped up a handful of grass and tossed it inside. Nothing happened. Still the full moon gazed down, and for a moment, he had the feeling of being watched.

He kicked the trashcan and recoiled in pain. Definitely real, why had he kicked it so hard? The clouds drifted onward and a powerful desire to sleep came over him like a blanket of snow.

Waking to a deep blue sky and the chirping of birds he'd never heard before, John laughed and shuddered. His body was damp with morning dew. *Sharon's probably worried sick!* he thought. He tossed the air freshener in the trash can and shook his head. What a weird night.

As he walked back through the woods toward the highway, he thought. "I... had to pee. Yeah, real bad. And then an - uh - elf came out. Yeah! An elf! And iiiit bit me. Owww," he decided he would rub a spot on his leg as he told her this. "And then, well, you know, I ran! Right into a spiderweb! A really big one. I got all tangled up and couldn't move. Yeah, it was horrible!" He could imagine the sense of shock, mixed with relief, on her face as he told her about how he'd slashed at it and the big spider came down with its big naupliar eye.

Just then a very realistic Kodiak bear jumped out of the brush and shouted, "Focaccia Birthday!", before it grabbed him in a vicious hug, crushing his bones and organs into a lifeless pulp and dropping him to the forest floor like used up puddle.

She

She opened the door to the dollhouse and stuck her fat hand in. At least Mommy Dora told her it was fat. Fat! Fat! Too many beaver cakes she'd shout! She didn't really know what it meant; she just felt pleasant and poofy.

The dollhouse was a gift from Papa. She didn't call him Papa Steven anymore, just Papa now. As long as she had to stay in this room, he'd make sure she was the happiest a little girl could be. She *was* happy, but still wondered why she couldn't go out.

"And if you ever do come out of your room, maybe because you're hungry and want a midnight snack, you must never, ever look out of the dining room window. That's where he LOOKS."

She really didn't understand this part, and often wondered about where she came from too. There was a vague fragment of a memory lodged in there somewhere: a blue sky circled by tall cedars, a lake breeze that felt like autumn. She didn't know how she knew these things or what they meant; they were just there, inside her.

Nor did she know why, whenever a particular kind of noise came from outside, she'd always know it was a Yamaha liquid-cooled, reed-valve induction engine, the kind used in the YZ125X and YZ125XN. Huh, she'd think, and that was that.

Sometimes she put the really big teddy Daddy bought for her on her back and flop around on the floor. She always tried to do this in the bathtub, but it would make Papa cry and then he and Mommy Dora would shout at each other while she was locked in the bedroom.

Once she saw a picture of a centaur in a picture book. She didn't know that it was called a centaur, but it did make her skin itch a kind of funny feeling. It looked a bit funny, maybe it should be swimming or something...

I guess it must've been about five months of living with the Rogers before she finally did go down the stairs at night. Papa and Mommy Dora had been down the road at the Byrd Theatre, and they were supposed to come home no later than nine-thirty. It was getting to be about her bedtime, but she had an immense craving for Quicksilver Full Synthetic 2-Stroke PWC and Sport Boat Oil. She descended the teak stairs that passed over the little closet with its vacuum cleaner and slatted door. The light from the plastic bead chandelier made her feel safer as she wandered the house by herself alone for the first time. It was cool inside, and she heard the low hum of central air as she made her first tentative steps across the Berber rug. Then she saw him, looking in through the window. The terrifying devil of a man, grimacing through his putrid beard and scratching frantically with his hand inside his pants. Eyes occluded by horrible silver discs, oily hair disheveled and filthy. She wanted to scream, but it was too late.

When the Rogers returned home at nine forty-five, they found it in the dining room. Sitting atop the now crushed dining table was a Yamaha VXR Waverunner. Steven Rogers slapped his forehead.

"Dangit! Jet Ski again!"

The Sports of Tomorrow

If you own the paper version of this book, feel free to jot down your cryptic scribbles and wild ravings about the nature of the puzzling words presented on this list.

grimmball

bad hockey

bear polo

mach racing

indoor throwing

skater wrestling

thud racing

barm pain-car racing

artistic car racing

cowboy broom engine

ps4 cowboy football

three-football

egg-and-skater

Florette

The house slaves were working all simple day and complex night to mop up the Weepy Flood of Florette, fourth wife of Groger the Great. The heaven machines had a feature for generating the cycles of all of Groger's wives to keep them in sync. It could also shut the cycle off but was malfunctioning, so that all the wives were stuck menstruating for close to two weeks now.

Although the house slaves had all had their voice boxes removed, it was obvious that they were getting very tired of performing clean up duties for Florette. On usual occasions, it filled her room and left the walls throughout most of the southeast wing misted, but this time, having gone on for so long, now filled all seven of her bathrooms, the Holodrome, the steam engine room and somehow infiltrated the plumbing so that all running water was replaced by the Weepy Flood.

Although Florette was the biggest bitch of all ten bullion wives of Groger the great, she was also the greatest screw. And this made Groger in all his greatness very unhappy. Everyone in Castle Basketball was feeling pretty down indeed.

Ring Ring "Dan, hey how's it going? ... Okay well listen, we really have got to get those heaven machines to switch off the menstrual cycle ... Yeah, okay. I do kind of own this planet so maybe you could clear a spot on your schedule for me ... Yes, haha, well it's been kind of a bad PERIOD here too! ... So tomorrow then? You can fix them? ... No? Not tomorrow? ... PIZZADAY?!... Jacobsday we're having the orgy! It's got to be done before that! ... Fine, if you're sure that's the earliest ... Okay, see you Jacobsday morning!" *Click*

So it went; this Nightmare in Blood lasted for three more simple days and complex nights. A few of the house slaves had mistakenly drunk the tainted water from the faucet. Groger had tried beating the message "do not drink it" into their useless slave minds, to no avail. They danced around madly, the freakish ichor having infiltrated past the blood-brain barrier. It got to the point where the slaves were using the tainted water to clean, which only made things worse. The cleaning water would make the house more unclean, and thus also the cleaning water. If the house slaves could have spoken, they might have called this a Menstrual Cycle, but that would be wrong, and Groger would have to work extra hard at beating the insolence out of them.

Finally, Dan showed up and fixed the heaven machines. It took all his skill and Dan was up to his elbows in, his words, "a tsunami of blood" all the while.

"Thanks Dan. I sure am glad you waited this long to finally drag your ass over here."

"Okay Groger the Great. Thanks for not paying me shit and I won't ever see you again, you Great Fuck."

With the seemingly unending flow stoppered for now, preparations for the orgy began in frenzied fashion. Extra house slaves were brought out of the cellar to help with the work while the ten bullion wives made their preparations to turn themselves on. For some this took longer than usual, but Florette was having the greatest difficulty getting her companionship generator to make her something that would turn her on. This went on for a while and Florette still felt savagely agitated. *Oh well*, she thought *I'll just have to try something mo' freaky*.

Meanwhile, Groger was in the Grotto with a whole closetfull of house slaves winding down from the game, taking them in quick turns, feeling pretty good about the whole thing. In fact, he was so content that he neglected to notice that the water was taking on a red tinge. None of the house slaves really wanted to point this out, but one, equipped with a speaker, yelled, "by Groger!" Groger just took this to be in response to his prowess in the passionate arts however

The simple day passed thusly and soon it was time for the orgy to begin. The guests began to arrive exactly as the heaven machines cycled into complex night, the quality of the ersatz moon light suggesting that it would be a deep darkness coming for a great length of time. Perfect light for bacchanalia: soft glowing tinged with orange. Seedy dullness.

Every pimp, ho, ho-ma, ho-ho-ma, and sex duke of Snowball 6 showed up for the great bang-a-rang. Whole tanker trucks of Astroglide were driven into the feast halls and then detonated to coat every square inch in slippery goo. Each guest was injected with bufotenin at the entrance while Groger was consuming vast quantities of Nuke, the drug from Robocop 2. When Groger regained consciousness from the prerequisite overdose, he snapped the neck of the houseslave who revived him in a blind fury, rampaged into the feast hall, stabbed two sex dukes in the heart with a rhinoceros tusk, and started going at it with the nearest ho-ma like a rabid dog.

Thusly it began. It was a giant, naked, legion of bodies thrumming and pulsing with no awareness but that of sex. There was Vaseline and vomit everywhere, and bodies were hurled to and fro, grabbed, raped, bitten and pinched without clemency. Groger started doing the steamroller over a bunch of laughing dukes and babes while he stared unblinking and crazed, his jaws clenched ruthlessly. Then everyone lit up cigarettes and listened to smooth jazz for a few minutes except for Groger, who was moshing and punching dudes, rocking out to punk music that existed only in his mind, and whose eyes turned to burning swastikas. Then the sex started up again.

It went on for so long that incredible friction began to evaporate the massage oil. People's thighs started to rub raw and Groger felt like he was ramming it against a hot, dry sheet of sandpaper. Regaining some hint of rationality, he became frightened. The fervent activity diminished, and the Fornication Fulcrum showed it going from Carnal Cacophony to Amorous A Capella. Next it dropped from Instrumental of Impotence all the way to Duet of Disfunction. The mood, which before had been like your whole body getting a yank, became tense and filled with fear.

Groger dropped the girlish Duke he was tickling and stood up. The hall was silent. All eyes turned to him. His rippling, powerful naked body grew three extra feet tall. He squinted, then concentrated deeply, peering at the wall. First there was a thin line of red where it inter-sex-ted with the ceiling. The line grew thicker and started to seep downward. When it reached halfway down, Groger knew what it was.

It was the Weepy Flood, again at high tide. As it reached the floor, it started to pool, and a ho-ma slipped and fell. Then a sex duke fell on top of her. Slowly more people began to slip onto the floor and the smell of blood filled the air. Guests whiffed the fecund aroma fizzling in the feast hall and began to feel lusty. Insidiously, a kind of gyration began. The fresh influx urged them on. Like a locomotive building steam, its piston rods plunging forward at first hesitantly, but then with greater velocity with each pump, the heaving began. Chug-a-chug-a-chugga. Chug-a-chug-a-chugga. CHUG-a-CHUG-a-chugga CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUGGA! Groger went to take his cellphone out of his pocket but obviously hadn't been wearing his pants for hours, so he sent out microwaves from his hand instead. CHUG-A-CHUG-A-

CHUGGA! OH YEAH! He psychically broadcast through the house, and it was Florette who answered on the other end, crying hysterically.

"Babe, here is a breathtaking poem I wrote in about one millisecond for you:

Bleed forth your scarlet monthly,
and coat the halls with it.
Release your lovely maiden's milk
from swollen, creamy tit.
Cry your salty, saddened tears
condensing as you wail,
until the hall is filled with all,
that is your menstrual cocktail!"

Instantly the Weepy Flood flew freely and unstoppered. It was the perfect aphrodisiac and lubricant two-in-one. The Coitus Clock struck Black Midnight, someone started playing a saxophone, everyone's coolers were refilled with Arbor Mist and ice cold Budweisers, and cash started shooting through the windows of the great hall. Everyone who had been injured or killed during the orgy suddenly came back to life and started boarding-the-beef-bus like never before. Groger's member gained a bonus three inches temporarily, and every ho became a ho-ma, every ho-ma a ho-ho-ma and every ho-ho-ma a sex duke. It was fantastic.

The orgy and complexnight continued for the time of many earthdays. When finally it was over, the guests took their gift bags and left, and the house slaves started cleaning up. As the heaven machines cycled from complexnight to simpleday, Groger lost his bonus boner, and exhausted, settled into his hardened Leopard Skin Throne. He sat there deep in his satisfied thoughts until he decided to visit Florette, the biggest bitch of all ten bullion wives of Groger the Great, but also the greatest screw. When he arrived in Florette's room, she was beaming with happiness and told him her menstruation had finally ceased. Elated, he grabbed her and plowed his beef jerky down deep. And thus ends the tale of the Weepy Flood and of the greatest Orgy Snowball6 would ever see.

Dick

"That'll be two hundred and fifty bucks, sir or ma'am."

Already out of the car, Tony threw three grimy coins through the window at the robot driver and went to kick the already much dented cab door, but the cab quickly zoomed off.

He and his brother walked up the few stairs, which by six o'clock were already swarming with bums, and Tony strode briskly across Harmony Plaza. Al had little time to read the graffiti, swarming in holographics over the ancient monument of Robogordon in the plaza's center. "Robo Rights" and "Death for Droids!" were the only two messages he could make out as he rushed ahead to catch up.

At the enormous stone doors of central precinct, Tony dug in his pockets for a twenty. "Got any change Al?"

Removing one shoe, Tony pulled the coin from within and slid it into the slot. The monolithic stone doors swung lethargically outward, Tony slipping through the gap as soon as he was able and Al tagging along behind. In the foyer, the brothers pored over the directory, the information desk unmanned and long since ransacked of all removable paraphernalia.

"Fifteenth floor, corridor Z. Kee-rist!"

Of course, the elevators weren't working, so 20 minutes later, huffing and badly tempered, Tony and Al walked into the Actionable Bureau's anteroom, joining the queue. Another endless wait later, they approached the window, and the secretary flipped on the two-way speaker, saying nothing.

"What kind of operation are you running here? At least they used to send a squad car to pick your ass up! What happened to that? Now you gotta pay for the taxi yourself? No elevator, no staff, what the hell kinda show *is* this?"

"Sir, can I help you?" the receptionist's voice came annoyed and tinny through the can.

Tony gave up; that was the last straw. "Yeah, we're under arrest."

"Thank you, sir, please take a number and wait over there."

Tony took the slip of paper. N442. He glanced at the tip jar and laughed, shaking his head. As they walked to the busted steel waiting room benches, there was a buzz and the board lit up. Al read: T68, B-C224 and N120. He looked at the ratty sleeping bags piled up by the wall and shuddered, hoping that they were only a joke.

Four and a half hours later, they were seated in an empty office. Not very impressive any way you looked at it. A holo of Bermuda tacked crookedly to one wall, a window the size of a paperback novel, a lamp, two chairs and an imitation Ikea desk. Instead of a nameplate, there was a folded strip of paper

that someone used a pencil to write "Grabowski" on. The door to the hall opened and a heavy-set man wearing neon-orange corduroy pants, a swamp-green dinner jacket over a powder blue imitation modacrylin button-up and a color changing musical tie walked in. His face was partially hidden by a paper folder he held in his left hand, and he carried a coffee mug full of licorice wands in his right.

"You the Dente brothers?" he asked, walking around the desk. Al, who had seated himself in what was apparently Grabowski's chair rose. He guessed he'd be standing for the remainder.

Tony observed the licorice, his eyes two firebrands. "Yeah, that's us. What's all this about? We ain't done nothin' man!"

"Yeah, yeah, there's been a mix-up," said Grabowski, who'd been stuck in another room watching blue tinted monitors since around the same time the brothers had exited the cab. He couldn't blame Tony for his attitude. Life for a cop wasn't much better.

"Mix-up?! What the hell man? What kind of mix-up you talkin' 'bout, cazzo?"

Grabowski looked up from the file. "Alfred Dente... *al dente*?"

Al, barely able to make out the statue of the botcop through the haze, didn't bother to turn around from the window as he shrugged his shoulders.

The dick just looked at Tony. "You heard me eyetie, a mix-up. You're free to go." He folded the file and sat back in the chair, arms folded detective-wise.

"Nah uh man. I didn't drag my ass all the way up here and wait in your stronzo shithole for 'mix-up'"

Grabowski looked on with a patronizing smile.

"Al, gimme another twenty."

Al padded his vest.

"Mama Mia!" Tony took out a hundred-dollar coin and flipped it across the table. The detective didn't even look down. "Minchiata!" Tony slid the coin back and rolled off a fiver. He slapped it down onto the desk, watching Grabowski's eyes. When the eyebrows went up, so did Tony's hand.

The detective pocketed the bill. "Your names came up in connection with my missing harmonica. Now, you'd be smart enough not to show up with that, granted, but anyways I found it this morning. It must've fallen out of my pocket when I passed out last night." He pulled the harmonica out of his pocket and held it up for them to see. "As I said, you're free to go." Grabowski chuckled, "Don't get all bent out of shape. At the very least you get a free reminder to keep your noses clean." He picked up the mug of licorice and bit one out with his teeth. He was clearly enjoying the illegal luxuries his position allowed him to lord over everyone else.

This was it: the moment they'd been waiting for. Al took a handful of powdered charcoal and potassium nitrate out of his pocket and flung it at Grabowski, who flipped the desk up and dove behind, harmonica and mug flying out of his hands. The homemade mixture exploded upon impact with the now vertical desktop and smoke filled the room. Tony activated his sonic imaging device and scooped up the harmonica and candy, Grabowski firing shots from his service revolver over the barricade. Using the harmonica to echo-locate their way out of the room, the brothers dashed out into the corridor where

Ron and Jimmy waited in the flying Anglia. Harry was scratching himself in the backseat badly joneseing for a fix of sweet, sweet Honeydukes candy.

You're Drunk; Here, Have Some More

this reminds of being in Brazil, too drunk and trying to order pork from a roadside vendor. long lost
lamented lavishings, oh shit, where did I start? I must've spilt something on my jeans

"you were telling me about the time that you got caught up in the circle of cola bean worshippers"

too much whiskey is a horrible thing, but too little is worse

"right of course, go on"

carnival, where the freak is the hero, and the hero, another man lost on wall street

"what does this have to do with the cola beans man?!"

anything pure, is too acute on the uptake

"you're drunk"

it's always a mess of jitters, and lack of intention

"here, have some more"

that yellow toolbox is staring me down, and winning

"pay no attention to him! he's been there for days now, and anyways, you were just getting to the good
part"

he's only ingesting the smut of my existence

"that's a selling point of the Rubbermaid toolbox!"

they say he made it, but I've never met rubber, not with any lasting impression

"don't you remember, at Charlie's, he came with two friends"

Phillip the latter and Phillip the Dark

"yeah, those two, if I recall, they were drinking out of their own decanters, but you never knew if that
was really happening"

in these times, a shoe is a good meal, or a lovely piece of conversation

"what, the shoe is? conversation? who knows."

much like a panda hat, or a Las Vegas screen

"you're getting off topic again, here, have some more. His name is Charlie. He's the poster boy for
Rolling Stone Magazine..."

when there was one

"should I put that in or leave it out?"

redaction's a bitch

"that's what I've been telling her, she doesn't listen the daffy broad"

never trust the man who smiles, he's always lying

"some sort of existential quagmire," I'm guessing "I'm guessing, why don't you talk with more sense"

finger grease screaming on the walls, and spiders too afraid to embody their own homes. a lone nat circling for escape. I think I need some more snuff.

"you put that stuff down. you don't know what you're saying. I think you need a nap, and furthermore, I'm not liking where the look on your face is going. PUT THAT DOWN!"

we should listen to Mahalia Jackson.

"you know damn well what happened last time we listened to Mahalia Jackson. It was at Charlie's place, she showed up with two guys, both of them drinking out of their own flasks, and you could be sure we didn't want any of that mess"

purple nun, freebasing, auto-erotic, self-contained, disturbing masses, amen

"amen"

"wait, I'm trying to establish a narrative here, and all you're giving me is this purply, poetry, gibble-wash."

life is a prose, spoken from the mouth of an idiot.

"you're drunk, here, let's have some more"

Wrong Turn

She went to the toilet and on her way back, opened the wrong door. It was the men's. Oh well, she was already there, might as well go again.

Returning to the dining room, she made a wrong turn. This time ending up in the kitchen. It seemed interesting enough, so she went ahead and stuck around. Someone handed her a box of green peppers. *This should be easy enough*, thought she. On an open space of counter, she set up shop. *Sink on the right, wastebin on the left. No problems there. Knife in the right hand. Check. Take one pepper out of the box with the left hand. So far so good.* She made a square on the top of one pepper with the blade, pulled out the seed nexus and tossed it. *Rinse the pepper, slice the pepper, then what?* She thought of her husband waiting at the table. She should probably use the bathroom one more time...

Right before the exit, she saw some food waiting to go out. It looked really good. Somebody would probably just love to take big, juicy bites out of it. She picked it up and went into the dining room, looking around for someone hungry. There was her husband. *No time for a chat, gotta get this food out.* Most everyone already had something on the table, so she went ahead toward the smoking section.

That's when it hit her. Where was her purse? Putting down the tray she turned and passed again through the room with her hubby.

"Hi honey!" her husband said with a smile. She waved and shot him a smile back.

Back in the hall. *Which door, which door? This one looks safe.* She twisted the handle and stepped on in.

A man looked up from his calculator. "Hi, I'm Gym!"

"Hi Jim. Nice to meet you!"

"Nice to meet you too, Gyrus, but it's Gym. G - Y - M."

"Sorry Gym. Say, you got a toilet in here?"

"Not a problem. Just take that door you came in from, turn right, down the hall then another right. Can't miss it!"

"Sure was swell meeting you Gym. Thanks for everything. Mind if I take one of these?" Her hand rested on the grating of a heating vent.

"Not at all. Go ahead!"

Removing the vent grating, she went back out. *Take a right, down the hall, another right. Got it!*

Man, it sure is hot. Someone should really open a window. And wouldn't you know it, right at the crook in the hall was a big ol' frame o' frosted glass, just ripe for the lifting! On the other side, of all things, Liam, digging through the trash hauling out huge handfuls of expired pizza hut coupons.

"You know each one of these things is worth one tenth of a cent?"

"What'll you do?"


"I came here to find my daughter. Some guys at the airport put me in a van and beat me up. They took everything I had and dumped me downtown. I gotta find money for a place to stay."

She looked at the duct cover. "Would this help?"

"Probably not, probably not..." He stuffed as many of the coupons as he could into his jacket, glanced left and right, then took off into the shadows, limping.

Hey, come to think of it, she could use some of those too. On the way out, CLUNK!, down came the window frame. *Dagnabit! Blue blazes! Great thunderbolts! How the heck am I gonna get back in?* She'd have to go through the alley and use the front door, which she did, again passing the hostess stand and meandering past the elegant tables. Waving again, she noticed her husband's lips tighten. *Better get a move on! Don't want the food to get cold. Wran doesn't like that.*

She was beginning to lose count of how many times she'd walked down this hall. She'd better start marking it down. That's when she realized: she'd been holding the kitchen knife this whole time! *Well, I can't remember how many other times I've been down here, so I guess we'll just start counting from one.* She took the knife and made one long, meandering slash on the wall. That gave her an idea. She could use the knife to mark which door was the ladies' room! This time no dawdling, Gudith!

She raised the knife above her shoulder and tried the first door. A man closing his fly looked up, called it a day on the zipper, and bolted into one of the stalls. She closed the door. *Nope, that's the men's room.* Using the knife, she made this shape: 

Behind the next door, that nice man again. He was looking at the calculator in confusion, his brow wrinkled as he scratched his head. He looked up and saw her, then raised his hand in greeting and smiled. He pointed to his right before going back to puzzle over the shapes on the calculator's keys.

She marked this door with a symbol like a reversed letter B, a triangle on the right.



The kitchen door was easy, just a the letter 'J' and a heart.

Finally, she opened the women's room door, then closed it, making one, very tiny pinprick with just the tip of the knife at the very bottom-center of the door. *Perfect.* She slipped in and found the stall she'd used before. Sure enough, it was still there: her Coach handbag, completely empty as she had left it, save for the September 2004 copy of Candyman magazine she'd been carrying around for some time.

She pulled down her skirt and seated herself, opening the magazine to the article she'd been reading earlier. Pierre Brosnan was wrapping up the filming of "Porno Valley" when the writer caught up with him in the DR Congo for an interview.

"P: Filming was tough but working with Pierre Brisbane and Commander Puke was inspirational. There's a chemistry between those two, you know. Just being on set with them, you feel it. They make you better. Their performances are just incredible, you really feel like they ARE Richard Nixon and Nancy Kerrigan.

G: Wait a minute! You mean, there were TWO of you named Pierre? That must have been pandemonium on the set!

P: Not really. Pierre is a method actor. Most of the time we called him Dick anyways, except that *one* day...

G: But come on, TWO Pierres!?

P: It wasn't a big deal! Remember when Malachi Douglas and Malachi Keaton teamed up to make the classic, "Dog Shit"? Or Kimberly Hudson and Kimberly Perry in "She Has a Smart Way of Wearing Socks"?

G: Okay, let me get this straight, you're saying it was totally nuts working with another actor with the SAME first name as you?"

*Gee whiz Gudy, you really could just sit here reading all night, couldn't you? Gotta get back to Wran!
He's probably been waiting to start this whole time!*

She came to a door. This one was unmarked, so it had to be the way back to the dining room, right? On closer inspection, it did have a marking, but not one she'd made. It mystified her. Oh well, with any luck it would at least not be another bathroom, another detour.

Upon opening the door, the displeasure was clear. What she saw all over the inside caused her to cry out for the first time during this whole ordeal:

"Shit!"

The Appliances of Tomorrow

If you are reading the paper version of this book, and are one of those who ruined it for all of us last time (you know what you did), please refrain from scratching your deranged feverish psychosis on this page. What happened last time will not be repeated.

flame causing fan

clothes disposal

apple refrigerator

black hot vacuum

brail disposal

instant dam

potato regulator

man opener

microwave refund machine

satanic gardener

flame machine

burglar spoon

sandwich washer

looking machine

clothes fire machine

steam garage

old table machine

hair door

clothes oven

hobopan

electric pencil bird

mousetrap heater

soulfriender

illusion oven

can getting machine

clothes burnager

clothes (ration)

Ingress

It wasn't his fault.

Well, *he* didn't think so.

He'd suggested waiting an extra couple of days to buy the tickets.

In any case, it couldn't hurt, could it? Haste makes waste. Or was it, "hesitation is defeat"?

These are the thoughts that came to mind as he stood at the precipice.

Something had definitely gone wrong. Maybe he'd said it in a tone of voice. Maybe he'd failed to appreciate her needs.

He gazed down at the craggy rocks below. Not exactly friendly, he thought.

She still held the blaster. Somehow, he felt the laser sight sizzling his gooseberry-grinder . Doom from behind, doom from below.

Leaping, it all rushed up to meet him.

How he felt her anger, each time he'd forgotten the dipping sauce. It'd been ages since he felt he'd done well. When he booked the restaurant. When he rented the staircase by accident instead of the car. It was all there, laid down in black and white and ketchup stains in the book of their love.

The rocks rose up. In those moments, he felt relief. The decisions had been made. His "indecisiveness" a moot point by now. She couldn't complain about that anymore.

One last thought, had he greeted her with a smile, instead of a frown. Had he looked upon her with love, instead of frustration. Had he danced around her frivolity, instead of succumbing to its idiocy, things might've turned out different. For her and himself too...

At the last, spires begging his corporeal form to drop, jagged stone invoking his ruin, the water split apart. Underneath it, the Lotus!

"Now we're talking!" he said aloud, diving through the open scissor doors.

He buckled in and threw the bird at the cliffs above.

"Initiate Scuba mode!"

The doors lowered as the car's electronics came to life and the water moved back into place. It was at this point that he remembered no model had even been made with "scuba mode", and the immense pressure from the sea above smashed through the windows began rushing into the cabin.

Pleased

It was the 24th of June, and I was pleased to be with Miss Fairchild of Bobbington Acres Dairy. The day had a mild, early summer quality and I was pleased to see not a speck of cirrus or cumulus occluding that pale blue lens of sky. I was pleased to have been washed recently and took her hand up in mine in a fluid, yet firm manner that I am ever so pleased to say had a very confident and gentlemanly conviction to it.

"Why Dr. Wagbag!" I was pleased to hear her say.

"Hush now, swill!" I was pleased to clamp down minaciously. My grip, ever tightening, pleased me. I was pleased when she twisted, slumping down on twisted knee. "Keep it up, you nimrod!" I emitted, pleasingly.

I dragged her ever so pleasantly down the slope of grass, so muddy since yesterday's pleasing rain.

Like an anchor, she twisted and dug in her pleasing and until then spotless white leather boots, like an early summer's day, in pleasant protest, which was pleasing, and I then called out, "You tug-wench! You wretched yank!".

Pleasingly, and repeatedly, I stumbled, my steps frustrated as my heels and toes caught her white hem, until, with great pleasure, we both collapsed in the muck.

She spat and my hand came pleasingly across her face. Smack! Oh the sound! As pleasing as the songbirds of early summer! I was pleased to be unable to rise, her posterior pinning me down by my coattails in a manner that *most* pleased me.

"Mademoiselle! It would please me to no end for you to remove your dusty rass," it pleased me to say.

You see, I was informed most recently by several pleasant associates at the Shaved Ape Inn, Shipton Under Wychwood, that the very woman I was escorting this pleasing as a lark of early summer day, had been distributing tugs to the very slayers and cutthroats that frequented the establishment. Oh, how pleasing the thought came to me: the convivial socialite Slop Fairchild, ever the pleasant hostess and hail-fellow-well-met compere, giving heaves to all comers.

I was pleased to excessively overreact to the rumors! How pleased I was to ponder in the dark, night after sleepless night! Now we footslogged through the gumbo, as pleasing as a ride upon the charabanc in early summer, to the abattoir at the bottom of the slick and most pleasing hill.

The grandfather had stopped moving at some point while listening to the story his grandson had "written" for the speech contest. Cascading failures of his powered heat exchangers put most of the system into shutdown somewhere around the part about the Shaved Ape Inn. There was little hope of a

reboot before the 245 to Union Street arrived, and only the aud/speech circuits remained active. The boy continued tapping away at his game of River Rabbit.

"So, Grandpa, what do you think?"

"You just read that to me? You wrote that down before, and just now read it? While that game was on the screen the whole time?"

"Sure did! Later the guy finds glowing pinecones in the forest and comes home and says, 'Grapefruit?! Haven't seen THAT in a bowl before!', and then he's riding a jet ski centaur on the infocorridor eating a hotdog with a t-shirt on that says 'STH' which stands for 'Some Terrible Hotdogs' and there's this robot who says he's sad because robots can't be sad. Then this dog who ran away from home because his family started to love their Amazon Alexa more than him shows up and starts prancing on its hind legs. But that's not the best part. A magical talking mantel clock is flying around and shooting lasers-"

The boy was too focused on the game to notice the bus go by and when the tablet erupted into flames, he threw it excitedly away and looked at his grandfather, who was by then dripping steadily into a puddle under the green metal bench.

City

As he took in the view from the twentieth floor, the lights went out all across the city. This was expected, of course, no surprises there.

Moments later, the city itself went out. Starting from the central business district and radiating outward like an eclipse, buildings, roads, various infrastructure and inhabitants suddenly winked out of existence. This too, was part of the plan, and not for a moment did he break his concentration. Nearby, the relay for the distorter ratcheted glowing red numerics. Everything so far was going swimmingly.

After the growing circle of darkness spread past the first ring road and began consuming most of the bohemian quarter, he thought of something that hadn't figured into his calculations. He sprinted toward the relay, but he himself had locked out manual override. No luck there. Ok, he'd wrap his tie around a pipe or something. Wait, no that wouldn't work!

The building vanished. *Gulp*, he gulped. It would be a long way down, not that 'down' held any real meaning in this new reality.

Earlier that morning, Sally closed the clamshell phone and tossed it into a cybercan.

She ran up to a random pedestrian and tackled her to the ground, then bolted into the street screaming. Car tires screeching, horns blaring, the shrieking cry of metal shearing tore through the intersection of 252nd and Fourth.

She checked her watch which, aside from the stolen jewelry, was the only thing she had on. 8:15. She was making great time. She gave a gawker the finger and took off, colliding into a stunned meter maid.

Laughing hysterically, feet shredded by the typical detritus of the city, Sally made her way maybe two hundred more feet before she herself was knocked down. Flailing violently, kicking and thrashing like a wild, wounded beast, flinging language fouler than her own personal stench, Sally cleared a circle around her. The meter maid who'd taken pursuit retreated a few steps and spoke into her shoulder mounted walkie-talkie. "It's that woman again, I'll need some backup". This particular meter maid, booted down the ladder after a string of 'accidental' taserings, missed carrying her trusty 7 CQ.

She snapped back from her momentary reverie, and looking down, found that her quarry had fled the scene. Sally was now standing in an iron trashcan, gibbering away about the mayor's fleet of black, invisible hang-gliders, hauling out garbage and lobbing it at those who stood around filming her on their smartphones.

When the patrol car finally skidded to a halt and the policeman jumped out to cuff Sally, it was still only 8:30.

"Yes, a new record!" Sally rejoiced.

Deep underground, Randall worked on his costume. It would have to be perfect. The bloodbath left in the wake of the last manhunt proved that the disguise could leave nothing to the imagination.

He still struggled with the coloring and the stitching. Finding enough human skin was no longer the problem; being able to patch it together in a convincing enough fashion was. He longed for the time he could rise into the world above, the world of light, and leave this cold, damp prison of shadows behind. Randall was just like them. He knew it. It was the inside that counted. He too was capable of love, of kindness. He too knew what it was to have a dream, and also telepathy, he had that inside too, and pyrokinesis as well.

He'd worked enough for today in the sewing room, and it was time for dinner anyways. He pulled himself up with his claws and loped toward the hatch. They'd been renovating old conduits on a section of the line between Hurley's Cross and Marina station, and there was likely to be a team walking down the tunnel back to the platform if he hurried.

He pulled his twelve foot long, chitinous carapace through the access and slinked along the tracks. He imagined what it would be like at one of the fashionable downtown restaurants with a date, where they served you respectably. Here's your head of human, sir. No cries of disgust, no angry lynch mobs, just light Vivaldi played by a breathing quartet, well dressed patrons and fine tableware. Another bottle of our finest erythrocyte sir? Perhaps a '72? Why didn't he deserve that? Why couldn't he be accepted? Oh, to taste fresh air. To really live! To feel kinship. Four hundred years of solitude. More than anything else though, Randall, just once, wanted to have someone he could call 'friend'. That and a flying limousine of course.

This one's pretty normal: some jerk hiding down an alley. Probably dressed in a trench coat. Likely nothing underneath. Your common, garden variety sexual predator. He breathed heavily, licking his lips and fat clumps of mustache in the process. You know the type; he'd wait for some librarian or schoolteacher, some bimbo, pounce on her and squeal, writhing back and forth until he finished all over her clothes and jaunt off into the night. That sort of thing.

Batman watched all of this on his heads-up display. Floating windows cycling through his planted cameras around Gotham. He shook his head. What a bunch of yo-yos, boneheads and whiffle balls. The cameras with their pitiless vigilance, so like his own, transmitted all the evil, madness, hatred and vice directly to his suit, which drew that energy in and powered its various appliances and gizmos. Both his suit and his mind fed off of this human corruption, Gotham a veritable buffet for his appetites. But tonight, Batman could stomach no more. He shut off the visual feed. In doing so, he immediately felt his strength waning. He chose this path. He could sustain either his life force or his soul, and no longer would he suckle at the bleeding wound of men's hearts.

He keyed the sequence into the relay which would both activate the distorter and ensure he could not turn back. He lit a peyote cigarette and walked to the window.

As he took in the view from the twentieth floor, the lights went out all across the city.

Fugger Imbiss

Ordinarily, Fugger Imbiss would emerge from the trail in a spot he'd already been to, then stand there for several minutes reorienting himself and figuring out where he was.

This time though, he knew long before that his trail was about to reconnect with the one at the entrance. He was anticipating it. How this clarity had come to him was another matter entirely. Had he somehow broken through 20 years of mental fog, had he finally drunk himself through to the other side?

"Hey, I think we're getting close." Zaboomafoo rotated his head up so that he could talk to Imbiss, who was riding him. "Say, you got any more of those funky berries?"

Imbiss figured a lemur was close enough to a palm civet and had been feeding him coffee cherries from his pocket. He'd picked some wild ones while wandering around, thinking maybe he'd try roasting a few, but man did this thing love them. He popped another one in Zaboomafoo's mouth, who then took off twice as fast as before. Maybe he'd slip back into the park in a day or so and see if he could find any lemur dunguss retracing his steps on the trail.

They shook hands at the gate. "Say buddy, thanks a lot for the lif-"

"Yeah yeah! Ok. Great to see you too! Gotta run!" Zaboomafoo leapt up into the trees. Imbiss figured he'd have another couple hours before his heart exploded, at best. It was a shame he hadn't gotten the chance to ask about dinner the other night. There was no way he was going to remember what kind of soup it was they'd had, and that would be a problem as his wife was bound to mention it. Zaboomafoo loved her soup and had been over on the night in question. This all made sense to Fugger Imbiss.

On the metro home, he decided to change at Stevens, then go to Newton instead of taking Orchard as he usually did. He wanted to see the new Gundam they'd put up outside the station and his wife would still be at work for a while anyways. He was on the Downtown line now and the public safety announcement played over the train's PA system. "In the event of an emergency... RUN". Imbiss watched his reflection yawn at him in the windows on the opposite side of the car. He thought about trying one of the cherries himself, chuckling.

The phone rang. An unknown number. He actually answered it. This is not something the old Fugger would have done. Had he even noticed it, he would have put off talking to whoever wanted him until some other time. Yeah, this perceptiveness felt pretty good.

"Fugger Imbiss? This is Daft Benedict from Wilmar International. We recently became aware of you through some CCTV footage that we saw and are dying to have you in for an interview. You're not busy, are you? Boy, do we have the job for you!"

A job! That was the last thing he had on his mind. "Look, I've got my hands full at the moment. Busy busy busy. I'm not really interested right now."

"Really? May I ask what you're working on?"

"Um, I'm not at liberty to say. Thank you very much." Imbiss hung up.

Suddenly he jerked to the right as the car ground to a halt. The lights went out. He righted himself, trying to think about how many times this had happened that week. After a moment, he stood up and walked to the doors, sticking his fingers between the rubber gaskets and pushing them out to the sides. With some force, the doors slid open and Imbiss jumped down onto the tracks. The tunnel was already full of passengers walking the rest of the way to the platform. Imbiss shrugged and joined them.

Damn. He thought about the beans in his pocket. He should have told them he was onto some big business in coffee. That would have impressed them. That's it! He would print some business cards as soon as he got home.

For a while, neither of them noticed it. Finally, Imbiss looked up from his shoes and blinked as he saw Marissa.

"Hi honey." He thought about what to say next. "What's for dinner?"

Marissa slowly turned her head. "Hey, listen, could you hold on a minute. No, it broke down again. I don't know, somewhere around the Botanic Gardens I think."

"Newton"

"Never mind, it's Newton. Hey, actually I'll call you right back." She hung up the phone. "You too huh? Sorry babe, could you pick something up for dinner tonight? Bruce asked me to finish the reports this morning, and now this."

The throng of people stopped moving. Something was keeping them from going forward. Marissa raised both wrists. "Now what?" She looked around. "Hey honey, sorry, I gotta run. See you around 8!" She grabbed the wheel of an access hatch to her right and, using both arms, slowly spun it counter-clockwise. The hatch flung open and Marissa jumped up past the threshold to strut into the darkness beyond, leaving the portal just gaping there.

Eventually, the crowd moved again. Imbiss pulled himself up onto the platform, no longer having any energy to see the Gundam. Instead, he walked straight to the Downtown Line and hopped on a train for Marina Bay.

Four stops later, making his way around a mouthful of betel nut, Imbiss squirted a nice crimson stream of spit between his shoes. He chewed and chewed, a big, fat smile plastered across his face, the floor a nice homogenous red by then. A ride on the metro just couldn't be any nicer!

Poor Fugger Imbiss. He was in high spirits by the time he got up the five flights of stairs to his door. Something was definitely different about him today. He could feel it. Stepping inside, he experienced something else new. A solenoid clicking and the tiny buzz of the washer machine. No way he'd notice a thing like that yesterday, probably hadn't noticed it once in the past decade actually. He was really

impressed by his increased perception. He'd have to start drinking early tonight. Maybe start with a alkylbenzenesulfonate bubble bath and that bottle of oven foam cleaner he'd been dying to break into?

Wait a second, the washer machine. Who'd started a cycle? Imbiss gulped and tiptoed into the living room. There was his wife, arms crossed. His wife, who stayed at home. All day. The shopper, the maid, the cleaner, the cook, in a word, the housewife. Not a senior level investment banker, right. He really had drunk himself to the other side after all. At her feet, about twenty or so bottles of Mr. Muscle. She was fuming. It had been a while since he saw her this mad. Last time was after he'd lost both kids, permanently, at the Old Airport Road food court.

So, his hiding place had been discovered. What on earth was he going to do now?

Speaking of which, what had he *actually* been doing all day?

Daniel's Bath

Jamal, from "Black House Party IV", bursts through the bathroom window, crashing through the blinds, his face painted black and green, parachute tethers dangling off his back. Daniel panics. Terrified, he picks up the bar of soap and starts to rapidly press the channel up button.

"Let's get this party started" Jamal growls through clenched teeth as he raises the assault rifle.

Daniel starts pounding the remote even harder, tears streaming down his face.

Jamal rolls his head back and laughs psychotically, his flak jacket quaking with the insane, uncontrollable spasms of his diaphragm. Daniel forces his eyes shut as tightly as he can, mashing harder than ever as Jamal stops laughing and begins squealing, sounding remarkably like a frightened pig. The tension is momentarily replaced by a look of confusion spreading across Jamal's face, and as if he no longer has control over his actions, Jamal glares down at his finger which has begun to slowly squeeze the trigger.

Then suddenly the bar of soap trick works and Jamal's head explodes like a grenade

Silence fills the bathroom. Daniel feels both sick and faint from the rush of adrenaline he's just experienced. *Just a few extra seconds and I'd be dead meat* he thinks. *My God*. Then, Daniel is lost to unconsciousness. Unconsciousness as black and dreamless as a moonless night.

Several hours later, or it could have been an eternity, Daniel awakens to the bar of soap ringing as it floats aimlessly around in the bathwater.

He puts it to his ear and hears THAT voice again. "WAKE UP DOWN THERE! Number 6747. The glow deepened in the eyes of the sweet girl. Tack the strip of carpet to the worn floor."

Then the same Deluxe-Algerian rapid firing of syllables until the quick seven beeps before starting over.

Daniel flings the soap at the wall as if it were some horrible mutant insect clicking its way up his arm. Where it impacts there appears a tiny crack in the drywall, a razor thin slit of light shining through. Little by little Daniel starts to garner information through the tiny hole about what's going on beyond. Somehow, he forms the image of a filming of a commercial for Tide laundry detergent.

Naked and dripping, Daniel gets up and walks slowly to the hole. As he puts his eye up to it, he sees a large grey carpet sitting between some matte lighting supports and a regular white washer machine with a red bottle sitting on top. There is a sound like termites in the wall as plaster crumbles and falls. The hole grows as lath cracks and drops away.

Now Daniel's entire head is through the hole. From from the other side, it would appear as if somebody had burst their bald nut through a blank expanse of wall. He sees that the washer machine is vibrating, and the red bottle is swaying almost imperceptibly back and forth. Aside from the wobbling washer it is immaculately silent.

"Action!" somebody shouts. Daniel looks around trying to find out where the voice came from, but he can't see anything past the light diffusers. Should he say something? Something about how clean Tide

gets his clothes? Actually, he thinks Tide sucks but he's not going to bring that up now, is he? He smiles while he thinks, looking at the camera. *Tide sure cleans up nice, no that's stupid. Tide is really great! Ugh, even worse.*

The same voice yells "CUT!" or "NAM SHUB!" "Perfect. You're a doll baby! I'm telling you; this kid nails every shot. Okay, that's a wrap people." Doors can be heard opening then footsteps echoing as they recede away.

Daniel waits and waits. By now he's almost totally dry, but it doesn't look like anyone's going to come over and say anything. Unable to contain his curiosity, Daniel rips and squeezes through the hole and walks towards the washer.

Getting closer, he realizes that it is incredibly far to the washer, and it is in fact enormous and only looked normal sized from afar. As he nears, the sound of the machine becomes unbearable. He falls to his knees and clasps his ears. The bottle of soap finally wobbles off and crashes to the floor like an asteroid, great fat globs of liquid dribbling down and forming a river that snakes its way across the floor, rushing over Daniel's redoubled form.

FLASH! He's trapped inside a six-foot long oak coffin. He can't move! There's no room for his arms to bash against the lid. He tries to yell but there's no air in his lungs. It seems like the coffin is moving. He can feel it bobbing sluggishly at first, then gradually it gets increasingly agitated. It seems to be picking up speed. He thrashes as cold water starts oozing inside. There's a crescendo of noise like they're nearing a waterfall, and Daniel hurls himself desperately from side to side as he feels freefall rise in the pit of his stomach. They were dropping!

CRASH! The coffin breaks open. Daniel is standing in front of a beautiful red head. He's still naked and is in a clearing at twilight, occupied by a two-story house behind him, a news van and crew.

"You mean it had the same lights as the one you'd seen before? How did you feel when they actually came out of the craft?"

Her right arm comes up holding a bar of soap a few inches from his mouth.



Daniel suddenly blurts out: "Next Sunday is the twelfth of the month so please come down to city hall and plead with the council to free the poor thief. Go now and come here later; there is a fine hard tang in the salty air and it takes a good trap to capture a fancy bear, so raise the sail and pilot the ship north."

She pulls the soap back to her, "And they explained the secret of their intergalactic ship was that is used some kind of inner-travel?"

"They took the axe and the saw into the forest, the fish twisting and turning on the rusted hook. A bowl of rice is free with chicken stew. Put the chart on the mantel and tack it down while serving the hot rum to the tired heroes. The thaw came early and freed the stream as the dune rose from the edge of the water."

"Surely many will be skeptical. You said the only thing they left behind was a plastic object you say looks identical to a blade fuse?"

She passed the bar back to Daniel. "Cardboard box," he says shrugging, then quickly sticks out his neck and takes a big bite of the soap bar. Chewing, Daniel feels his teeth loosen and come out. He swallows the ball of bone and soap, and his stomach begins loosening.

When he finally starts retching, he's back in the bathtub, the water as icy and filthy as a puddle on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike in January. He grits his teeth, something like sand in there and takes his left hand out of the box to wipe his mouth, smearing white powder all over his cheeks. It seems he must've passed out while snacking on the laced Dettol detergent flakes. Daniel thinks of the jingle from his favorite commercial:  *Dettol Laced Detergent Flakes, Don't Eat 'Em!* 

Heshe

They weren't going to let him live it down, were they? Two in the same night, A Polaris 800 and a Yamaha VXR. Not exactly competitors, but still there was a conflict of interest. Not to mention the fact that at least one of them was well on its way to total rehabilitation.

Today's another day thought Shrig Heshe as he tightened his half-Windsor. I can't let last night's mishap get me down. Gotta keep the momentum going. He waited, listening to the growing sounds of two-stroke engines, until the down arrow lit up and the doors opened onto an already crowded elevator. He let two four-wheelers off before boarding, the haze of engine exhaust irritating his eyes.

The high-speed elevator took him down 200 floors to the executive floor, heat steadily building as it descended. Shrig's shirt grew visibly damp with perspiration. As head of marketing, he hadn't put much thought into this meeting with the boss, not routine, but fairly mundane for someone of his seniority.

Upon entering the office, Shrig saw Joe Mammon speaking on the phone. He went ahead and sat in a chair in front of the desk. Joe snapped his fingers, and Shrig stood back up.

"Okay, right got it. We'll take care of it, no problem." Joe hung up the phone. "Look Heshe, we got a problem." Shrig noticed that Joe's tail was stiff, never a good sign.

"What's up Joe? Another mix up in the Rockies?"

"No Heshe, this has to do with that mess last night."

"Hey, it's not an issue. We got it worked out. Turns out no one had taken a bite on the snowmobile guy and after showing the family of the Yamaha some literature-

"Heshe I'm going to need to see your gun."

Shrig blinked. Reluctantly, he drew it from his pocket and handed it across the desk. Joe Mammon looked it over before sliding open a drawer and putting it away.

"C'mon Joe! Seriously, there were no bids on the Snowmobile. We pulled him out of the Blue Ridge years ago and no one ever took a liking. He just kind of ambled around. No one was going to make a purchase; he had no friends!"

Joe wrinkled his brow. "The Polaris is a write off. Forget about him. We don't know how this happened, but someone put our man onto the Rogers. He kept showing up at their house. Interference and all. Now they're confused, said they hadn't even started thinking about owning a PWC."

"My people talked to them this morning! They said they'd still consider it!"

Joe Mammon rubbed one of his red glowsticks in apparent exasperation. "They were giving you the run around Heshe. They're out, returned the test model an hour ago."

Shrig sighed, "Damn."

Joe put a fingertip on a lever, absentmindedly torquing it this way and that. "There's another problem."

Shrig said nothing.

"Yamaha wants out too. Said they're tired of you playing fast and loose with your assets in the mid-Atlantic. Now personally Heshe, I'm not keeping count, but they said the girl was your fourth one."

"That's crazy! How could they-"

He went on, "they said they'd pull the account. The whole damn account, Heshe. Unless-"

"Unless what," Shrig said through clenched teeth, his face clouding over.

"Unless we let you go. Now we all know you're a heck of a salesman Heshe; nobody's denying that. You'll be back on your feet in no time. But you also know we've got to have this one. Nothing's moving but the Yamahas, and since Kawasaki dropped us last year..."

Shrig just stared.

"Damnit Heshe! You know I don't want this, any more than you do!" Joe paused and then gave Shrig a glum look. "Heshe, you're fired."

Shrig Heshe, being made entirely of ice, did not like the sound of this new development one bit.

Mum's Twin

Why hadn't anyone ever mentioned Mum's twin? Was she translucent? Was she on fire? Well, no. I guess not. Because they said she was mum's twin, right? Mum wasn't on fire, nor was she semi-transparent. Unless the twin was that other kind of twin. What are they called again? Daydreamin' Diegos? Well anyways, this was going to get me nowhere. So, I'd have to ask mom, I mean, mum. But then again, if mum hadn't talked about it in the 25 years we've known each other then would she talk about it now? Well, now I know, right? That should make a difference. I didn't know before so of course she wouldn't talk to me about it. I mean, I didn't know jack about the twin. Who wants to have a conversation with some kind of jerk on a topic they know nothing about? Surely not mum.

Okay, but don't get ahead of yourself Sbarrtholomew. It's not like you really know anything now either. Didn't you just guess that maybe the twin had a machine gun or something like that? Mum's still not gonna wanna discuss this with you.... and another th-

But by then it was too late. She'd already gotten to nowhere. Stepping out of the car, which she should've been paying more attention to, she being the only one in it after all. And the car was the inanimate kind, or at least the kind that needed to be driven by something that breathed. Preferably something intelligent in Sbarrt's opinion. Not one of those things they have in parks in the springtime. You know the big ones that walk around and like, look at you? Ok, so this is nowhere then. There must be someplace to buy some dex around here. Boy, should she go for one of those patches. You just stick it on your skin, sit back and let the good times roll. Not like that stuff they used to use, what was it again? It came in a wax gourd. Whatever it was was definitely sometimes clear, and if you drank a lot of it... That's it! A drink! That's why they called it that! Because you drink it, I guess.

Oh hey, this is nowhere though. So, I don't really know where I got the idea that they'd have a place to get drugs. Say! What if they did? What kind of drugs would they be? Like, you would open up the box and what would come out? Dust? Air? Nowhere juice? I'm not a scientist! Oh... my... God... The car!

It had driven itself off a cliff. That's that then. I'm stuck here now. No car. No dex. None of that nowhere juice I keep hearing about. How on earth am I going to get back. Bus? Ha! Fat chance of that. They wouldn't have buses out here. What do you think they are, some kind of scientists?! Better start getting a move on.

There's someone! Hey Mr.! Over here! Hey Mr.! It's me. Oh well I guess you don't know me but anyways I was over here and was thinking it sure was a hot day. I guess you could call it hot, I don't know, yesterday was about the same right? Though I don't really know what it was like out here. Could have been your most recent ice age for all I know. Think they had bicycles back then?! Forget it; no chance! Gee, you think you could give me something to eat.? I'm starved. I haven't eaten anything since... Now when was it again? No of course I'm not asking you. Let's see, Thursday we went to that place. Have you ever been there? They've got those things you sit on. Tons of 'em! I think they're called slap jacks. That's jacks with a plural s! If you think I mean fewer than two, you'd better think again! And that's not all, all the eye contact you can handle! Here's the best part though: they give you some of those paper things to wipe your face off with. Haha. Not totally off of course. What do you think this is? Picasso?! You can

get as many as you want. Now what were those called? Oh yeah! Slapjacks! Sure was a swell place. Oh hey, but I'd better get going. Nice meeting you Mr.

But it was too late. He'd already turned to ash and drifted away on the wind. Stolly looked around. Purple sky, purple dunes, purple drones, purple stuff and Richard, among others she'd rather not see right now. Just tons of stuff here in nowhere! Here comes one of those drones now! I'd better destroy it with this log!

She hefted about the two-by-four she had and slunk down behind one of the purple dunes I was telling you about before. You know, the purple ones. The very tip of the drone became visible as it rose, warily. Before Sbarrrt could slash down on it with that really nice lumber, the drone spoke.

"Miss, you are unlawfully parked. This is the L. Frank Baum institute for childhood health supplements. WAKE UP down there!" This was followed by some fast, incomprehensible language which beat the heck out of Sbarrrty, sounding something like Jumbo Spanish.

"You sure are one wild robot sir. Where'd you learn to talk like that?"

"If you'd like to make another call, please hang up and dial Raiquan Clark. Agitated? Frustrated? Just plain burned out? Oort Romnox from 107.3 KNUJ-FM, "the Nuje", has got you covered. All Ted Nugent, all the time! You were just listening to Cat Scratch Fever. Next up, Cat Scratch Fever! Pick up a pile of rubber ducks down at your local yield sign and stick that handheld game system where the sun don't shine!" Again, the strange language, then a series of otherworldly beeps.

She raised up the timber then brought it powerfully down on the drone's dome.

"Clank rrrrrnk ZZZzzZ Click. The Spencer Campbell Thomson says Neiiighhh! *Sputter* If you want something *splork* done, you have to *kerchunk* already be home by now if you *FOGHORNNNN!* lived here" It whizzed around drunkenly for a while then shook itself and zoomed off over the horizon. Sbarrrtholomew felt a bit sad. She was alone now. Oh well. Lots to think about! Lots of ideas to keep me company! Now look at the cow skull over there! Theeeeeere's something to spend an unimaginable amount of time contemplating, possibly interviewing. I guess I'll just walk over there and see if it's vibrating. It might be! Oh, but darn! There are some terrible hotdogs in the way. If those aren't hotdogs, they might be something else, something much worse-

Dwam desperately wanted out. The man's grandson said it was the greatest miracle of all time! Uploading your consciousness. To live forever and ever inside a computer. They hadn't said anything about bugs, loops, hiccups, glitches, goofs or doo-dos. Just think, he could've saved himself the hundred bucks and gone to hell for free!

Titular

They'd been jacked into the harmony box for the past three hours, watching HER show. How he hated that Victor Newman, now more machine than man, and much the worse for it in his opinion. He had however, felt a tender moment when Victoria emerged from the Krasnikov tube, her previous lacunal amnesia suddenly restored when she awoke in Victor's iron arms.

He waited for his limbs to wake up, the pins and needles tingling as blood began circulating. Alkalosis was common at this altitude, or so he'd read in the colonization handbook. His wife was still in the prone position she preferred when remote viewing.

"I'm still not talking to you," he burped around the accumulated saliva.

"..."

He rose to check the camera. The dust storm still raged, and he watched the demoralizing process of another solar panel being shredded and thrown into the darkness, the subsequent short-circuit causing his wife to shriek angrily.

"GRREEAAAGGGHHH!" This caused him to smile, which she picked up on, he having no idea how since he was facing the wall.

"Was that another transformer? Or a panel? Get out there and fix it! I've got to get ready to go out with Stam!"

"Look, I'll fix it, but you know I'm still mad about h-"

"You're still mad?! About what? About how you only scored 30 ratchets in the last solar cycle?"

He'd scored 57 but mentioning that now would do just about nothing. Anyhow, they'd need the voltage for the turrets that night (you know, the dingoes and all that), so he suited up and stepped into the airlock.

The concussion was louder than anything he'd heard yet. His arms immediately shot up to cover the back of his head as debris flew past with incredible velocity. Fast, deep whistles shot furiously from behind him, and though he didn't hear it, it was *that* vase that got him; he was unconscious before the sound could even register.

In the dream, the three of them were playing 3D blacklight mini golf. He was already five under par, leading by a number of strokes over both competitors: his wife and Harry Potter.

They approached the eighth hole, but he couldn't understand the strange markings on the sign. It had both exponents in superscript and some other symbolic set denoted in subscript.

Seeming perfectly reasonable, they three teed off simultaneously, his neon yellow ball bonking off a weird stalagmite formation and rolling backward between his legs.

He turned to chase it as his wife laughed, "That's two strokes. Mark it down!" She wasn't faring much better though; her ball was stuck in a hazard, and she was slashing at the sand with her putter.

Repeated attempts to bank the ball past the rocks made him want to shred the scorecard, and he gave up. She too stopped and they both watched Harry.

Confidently, smoothly, calmly, he knocked the ball and it passed right through the stalagmite, emerging from the other side and plopping into the plastic goal cup.

"Hey, I thought you said no magic!" he griped.

"N-no. I didn't use magic! You know it's, what's that called...?"

"No way! You cheated. That's what it's called. I don't want to play anymore!" Dejectedly, he walked to the obstacle to look.

"I didn't use magic, really! That's real. Oh man! What's it called?"

This time his wife chimed in. "Right!" she snapped her fingers. "It's something like once in trillion billion years, you keep bumping up against a wall, but then suddenly you pass right through!"

"Yeah! That's what I'm talking about. It's got a name. Oh man. It's the title of that book!"

"What book? Both of you are just making this up," but he'd heard about it too, and now it was gonna drive him crazy if he couldn't remember it. "Anyways, why are you taking HIS side?"

They weren't listening though. All three were trying to remember.

"It's that book! "Love in the Time of Quantum Tunneling" or "Love in the Time of Vacuum Decay". Something like that, by Chop Suey or Ra's al Ghul or something"

Ok, he'd buy it, but still couldn't help but feel that Harry had duped them. A nagging feeling that Harry was pulling his leg...

Just like, upon waking in the desolate glare of the alien quadruple suns, his suit blaring alarms, the mutant dingoes tore at his partially severed appendage.

X Man

"I'm desperate. Without any money, there's no gold. Without the gold, there's no liftoff" Elijah heard a noise on the line. It could be bugged. "Listen, I've got to go. Now's no good." He cut the connection and looked down at the handset. Oh thank god, not bugged, just call waiting, he hoped.

He pressed the button and put the phone back to his ear. "This is Mr. Big."

"Mr. Big?"

"Sorry, no. Ehem, sorry. I was in character." Good one Eli! "You've got Eli. How're you Trass?"

"Fine. Hey, any way we could do the interview now? I just need a few quick quotes. We're still doing that blurb about the 20th anniversary."

"Oh, not THAT again. Jesus am I sick of that shit. I just went through this for GQ. GEE WHIZ Mr. Interviewer it sure was fun wearing those hobbit feet, only why Peter wanted so much goddamned gel in them all the time made no sense!"

"I know, I know. But c'mon Fr-"

Elijah gritted his teeth and was just about to hang up. As he moved the phone away from his face he heard her rapid fire apologies like the wings of a mosquito. "Fine," he put it back up to his ear. "Make it quick".

"Ok. First question. How was it wearing those hobbit feet all the time?" Elijah launched the phone full force against the wall. It left a nasty dent in the drywall but as he made his way to the door, he could see the display was still on.

"Jesus, what the hell was that? Eli? Are you there?" Her tinny voice as he tried to break the phone in half on his knee. The anger waned as did his commitment to destruction. "Another time Trass. I can't do this now. Sorry." Again, he hung up. Rethinking going out, he sat down.

It had been a rough few months. First, the cat who kept asking him to find "Org-12", whatever the hell that was, then the power relays in the flying saucer stopped working. It was a mess.

"You gotta get it together dude." Ian told him one night somewhere around Callisto. "That woman you're dating, what was her name, Garbeth? Trabitha?"

"Trass." Eli fixed his eyes straight ahead through the viewscreen, not taking his hands off the steering levers.

"Trass. Whatever. She's just using you brother. You've got to get your life back."

Eli took another long pull of the whiskey. "Stay out of it Ian. What do you know anyways. You're so out of touch." He felt like flying over the great red spot now, like he wanted to look at something that mirrored his own anger. "When was the last time you got out anyways? You stay holed up inside all day. If I didn't come around to pick you up every now and then you'd probably be collapsed in a corner somewhere and no one would even know it."

"Hey look buddy, I'm just trying to help. You oughtta lay off that stuff so much too." This was said as Eli broke the seal on another bottle of Jack, the last one rolling around with the other empties on the floor.

"I'm not drunk. It's everyone else that's drunk" A passing UFO dodged suddenly out of the way, the little green man inside angrily shaking his fist.

"Like that guy!" Eli said.

Ian didn't comment. He had enough to think about: what were the odds of two craft this size ever encountering each other in the vast expanse of interplanetary space.

"I've about had it with you. Sitting in that chair whining all the time. Playing your shitty reggae tapes. Your holier than thou cock'n'balls routine. You know what, you can just stay up there for all I care. Yeah. I don't need you. Moldy old McKellen: greatest has-been that ever lived," this last bit falsely concealed as Eli muttered.

The rest of the flight was spent in silence. They two too angry to say anything. Eli dropped him off at the satellite and tried flying straight home. He landed behind a mountain and switched to land mode, driving around looking for the entrance tunnel. It was the wrong damn mountain though and he'd have to drive 20 minutes to his own or risk being spotted by stargazers and found out. This glitch in the navigation system was the first of some systemic failure, but he'd have to wait to find that out.

About five minutes down the road is when he noticed the flashing. Damn! He pulled over and got his third DUI. In Wyoming that meant even his lawyer couldn't get him out clean. Damn damn!

It had only gotten worse from there. That night must've been sometime in early summer, as he'd been driving with the top down. Now most of the leaves had fallen from the trees and not once had he returned Ian's calls. He missed the ol' bloke though, and was starting to get a bit worried that maybe his prophecy would come true.

He was finally free to leave the house, but had little desire to do so. You'd think that after the three months of house arrest he'd be itching to go out, but what was the point?

He walked to the counter to pour himself a shot. He was taking a glass from the cupboard when-

"Sure that's a good idea man?"

GODDAMN IT! The glass shot reflexively from his hand and shattered all over the floor. It was that cat again! "Do you always have to do that?!"

"Sorry pal." The cat locked his vertical eyes on the glass shards. Moments later, they rejoined as the shot glass they'd been before, which rose back into the cupboard as if the tape were being played in reverse.

"Hey, no problem," said Eli acidly. He was already pouring another shot into the newly reconstructed glass. Stupid cat.

"Any chance you found any leads about the Org-12 business?"

This is what the earlier phone call had been about. If he was able to get enough gold to repair the saucer's control computer, he was gonna lock the cat in the car and drive it off a cliff.

"NO! I haven't gotten any of your idiotic Org-12. Now leave me alone!" He walked to the living room and plopped into the captain's chair. "TV ON!"

"-for the 20th anniversary, which is coming later this year."

He was a millisecond away from shutting it off before the next cut showed something that made his jaw drop.

"Of course, he will be fondly remembered as Gus the Theatre Cat and X-Man by many as well. For those just tuning in, the orbiting home of Sir Ian Magneto McKellen, 82 years old, was seen breaking up on re-entry over the skies of Fiji just minutes ago. A great man who will most likely be missed by loads".

Eli looked at the bottle in his hand. He couldn't even cry. Where there should have been pain, was only a scrubbed away void. His best friend for the past 20 years. His mentor, his confidante, his guide, crying shoulder and teacher, was now a blackened space skeleton, and he couldn't even shed a tear. He didn't hate what he'd become; he'd become nothing. There was nothing to hate.

He rose, walked to the sink and poured the bottle down the drain. That was it. No more Jack. No more Trass. This time he meant it.

"Hey, can I get a can of that stuff you call Toon Na?"

And especially no more cat! He put on his coat. Walked to the door without saying a word and goddamn it if he had to walk, he was gonna get that gold TODAY! Enough was enough.

It was now December. Tomorrow would already be the nineteenth. He could barely believe how fast the time went, but it made sense when you thought about how busy he'd been.

The recovery had been rapid, though almost unendurably difficult. He'd sealed the cat into the saucer and programmed it to sail off in roughly the same direction as Pluto at the same time as he dumped Trass like a bad case of "the area". He got back in touch with Merry and Pippin (still not getting around to picking up their real names) and lastly, kicked the sauce. That was the toughest of all, though it really shouldn't have been since it was the alcohol that treated him the worst. He stood by the fireplace, his home filled with guests. Soon the anniversary special would come on and they'd all file around the TV to

watch it. Viggo was carrying around a rather large and suspiciously real looking rhinoceros tusk filled with nog, a holographic recording of Ian Holmes looped in the corner where someone had kicked it, Morgan Freeman wandered around talking to anyone he came across (though why HE was there was a total unknown), and Cate sat in the captain's chair while she and Hugo played rock paper scissors quietly and with utter concentration. There was only one thing missing from the party.

Fro-, I mean Eli, sorry, thought about how he'd felt in that chair only a few months prior, or more accurately, how he hadn't felt. He missed his buddy, that's for sure. Nothing could ever take his place and he felt the wound would never heal, but in a way, he was glad even to feel that.

"Hey, everyone, it's starting!" called the cyborg Orlando as everyone quickly shifted their attention to the TV, Hugh Jackman descending from the shattered skylight.

That night, Eli dreamed. He was in a helicopter which took him way up. He recognized this from the scene where they'd filmed the fellowship's first clumsy steps of cooperation.

The helicopter dropped him off, then took off and away. A few paces further, on a rock, sat Ian. "Frodo," he said.

"Gandalf."

"Eli."

"Gandalf".

Ian took a deep breath.

"It's good to see you old friend. You know, we missed you at the party tonight."

"I saw it. It looked like a good one."

"It was. You know. I've been doing a lot of thinking."

Ian smiled. "So have I. So have I, my boy!"

Eli smiled back, something collecting in the corners of his eyes.

"You were right Eli. Those things you said. About me minding my own business. I guess you get a lot of downtime up here and well, I want you to know how much those things you said really meant to me."

Eli continued smiling.

"It was wrong of me to stick my big nose where it didn't belong. I guess I was something of a moldy old codger then."

"That's right, Gandalf."

They both chuckled.

"And do you remember what you called me after that? 'The greatest has-been that ever lived'! That was a good one. I guess I deserved it, huh?"

Eli nodded slowly, a big grin revealing his gap-tooth.

"I just wanted to thank you, for finally being the one to take off the gloves and give it to me straight. For snapping me out of it. I wish I'd listened. Well, I'm listening now, and I want you to know how sorry I am for how I was."

"I forgive you Gandalf."

They embraced. The tears finally came. The tears that wouldn't come as he watched flaming steel fall from orbit, spraying hot death all over that nudist beach in the south pacific. Tears of happiness and pride. Pride and redemption, as Ian finally learned the one lesson Eli had always tried to teach him.

They held each other like that for some time. Then the sound of distant sleigh bells echoed through the mountaintops. Gandalf quickly donned a pointed red cap and gold rimmed spectacles. It looked quite good with the beard grown back out like that. "They've got me playing another role up here now. Tonight's the big dress rehearsal before the opening act next week. Gotta run chum! Give my best to Sean and the boys. Tell 'em Chris ended up down there, so they don't have to worry about him anymore."

They waved as a big sleigh swooped out of the sky, scooped up Ian, then carried him off into the already heavy with snow clouds.

Merry Christmas!